THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

35¢ NOVEMBER

DEAD CENTER
a novelet by
JUDITH MERRIL

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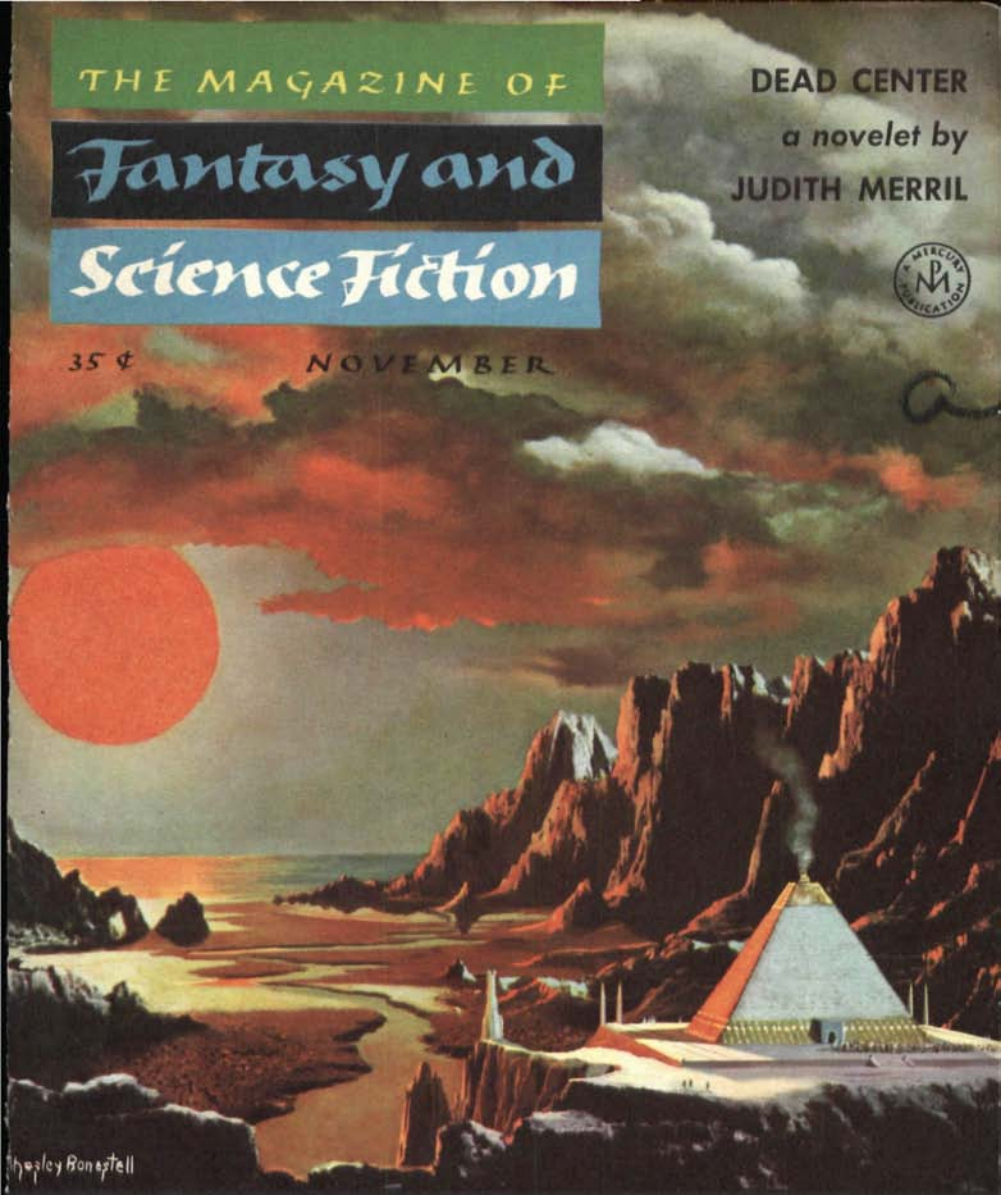

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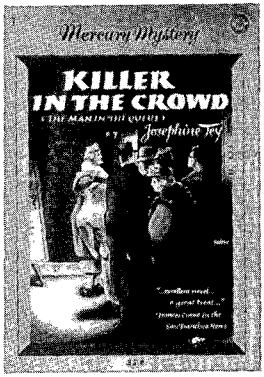

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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This is Judith Merril's first story in F&SF, but I don't think it's necessary to say much in introducing her to our readers. I'll just remind you that her first story, That Only a Mother (Astounding, *1948), and her first novel,* SHADOW ON THE HEARTH (*Doubleday, 1950), revealed a fresh and individual talent for showing the direct emotional impact of science upon private lives; that her anthologies, of which the latest,* BEYOND THE BARRIERS OF SPACE AND TIME, *has just been published by Random House, are distinguished by admirable taste and diligent originality; that her 1950 novel is the basis of David Davidson's celebrated TV-play,* Atomic Attack, *now used by Civil Defense as a cautionary lesson — and add that this new novelet embodies all the poignancy and personal immediacy of the best Merril in its moving observation of those usually forgotten figures: the family of the First Man in the Moon.*

Dead Center

by JUDITH MERRIL

THEY GAVE HIM sweet ices, and kissed him all round, and the Important People who had come to dinner all smiled in a special way as his mother took him from the living room and led him down the hall to his own bedroom.

"Great kid you got there," they said to Jock, his father, and "Serious little bugger, isn't he?" Jock didn't say anything, but Toby knew he would be grinning, looking pleased and embarrassed. Then their voices changed, and that meant they had begun to talk about the important events for which the important people had come.

In his own room, Toby wriggled his toes between crisp sheets, and breathed in the powder-and-perfume smell of his mother as she bent over him for a last hurried goodnight kiss. There was no use asking for a story tonight. Toby lay still and waited while she closed the door behind her and went off to the party, click-tap, tip-clack, hurrying on her high silver heels. She had heard the voices change back there too, and she didn't want to miss anything. Toby got up and opened his door just a crack, and set himself down in back of it, and listened.

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In the big square living room, against the abstract patterns of gray and vermilion and chartreuse, the men and women moved in easy patterns of familiar acts. Coffee, brandy, cigarette, cigar. Find your partner, choose your seat. Jock sprawled with perfect relaxed contentment on the low couch with the deep red corduroy cover. Tim O'Heyer balanced nervously on the edge of the same couch, wreathed in cigar smoke, small and dark and alert. Gordon Kimberly dwarfed the big easy chair with the bulking importance of him. Ben Stein, shaggy and rumpled as ever, was running a hand through his hair till it too stood on end. He was leaning against a window frame, one hand on the back of the straight chair in which his wife Sue sat, erect and neat and proper and chic, dressed in smart black that set off perfectly her precise blonde beauty. Mrs. Kimberly, just enough overstuffed so that her pearls gave the appearance of *actually* choking her, was the only stranger to the house. She was standing near the doorway, politely admiring Toby's personal art gallery, as Allie Madero valiantly strove to explain each minor masterpiece.

Ruth Kruger stood still a moment, surveying her room and her guests. Eight of them, herself included, and all Very Important People. In the familiar comfort of her own living room, the idea made her giggle. Allie and Mrs. Kimberly both turned to her, questioning. She laughed and shrugged, helpless to explain, and they all went across the room to join the others.

"Guts," O'Heyer said through the cloud of smoke. "How do you do it, Jock? Walk out of a setup like this into . . . God knows what?"

"Luck," Jock corrected him. "A setup like this helps. I'm the world's pampered darling and I know it."

"Faith is what he means," Ben put in. "He just gets by believing that last year's luck is going to hold up. So it does."

"Depends on what you mean by *luck*. If you think of it as a vector sum composed of predictive powers and personal ability and accurate information and . . ."

"Charm and nerve and . . ."

"Guts," Tim said again, interrupting the interrupter.

"All right, all of them," Ben agreed. "*Luck* is as good a word as any to cover the combination."

"We're all lucky people." That was Allie, drifting into range, with Ruth behind him. "We just happened to get born at the right time with the right dream. Any one of us, fifty years ago, would have been called a wild-eyed visiona —"

"Any one of us," Kimberly said heavily, "fifty years ago, would have had a different dream — in time with the times."

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Jock smiled, and let them talk, not joining in much. He listened to philosophy and compliments and speculations and comments, and lay sprawled across the comfortable couch in his own living room, with his wife's hand under his own, consciously letting his mind play back and forth between the two lives he lived: this, here . . . and the perfect mathematic bleakness of the metal beast that would be his home in three days' time.

He squeezed his wife's hand, and she turned and looked at him, and there was no doubt a man could have about what the world held in store.

When they had all gone, Jock walked down the hall and picked up the little boy asleep on the floor, and put him back into his bed. Toby woke up long enough to grab his father's hand and ask earnestly, out of the point in the conversation where sleep had overcome him:

"Daddy, if the universe hasn't got any ends to it, how can you tell where you are?"

"Me?" Jock asked. "I'm right next to the middle of it."

"How do you *know*?"

His father tapped him lightly on the chest.

"Because that's where the middle is." Jock smiled and stood up. "Go to sleep, champ. Good night."

And Toby slept, while the universe revolved in all its mystery about the small center Jock Kruger had assigned to it.

"Scared?" she asked, much later, in the spaceless silence of their bedroom.

He had to think about it before he could answer. "I guess not. I guess I think I ought to be, but I'm not. I don't think I'd do it at all if I wasn't *sure*." He was almost asleep, when the thought hit him, and he jerked awake and saw she was sure enough lying wide-eyed and sleepless beside him. "*Baby!*" he said, and it was almost an accusation. "Baby, *you're* not scared, are you?"

"Not if you're not," she said. But they never could lie to each other.

II

Toby sat on the platform, next to his grandmother. They were in the second row, right in back of his mother and father, so it was all right for him to wriggle a little bit, or whisper. They couldn't hear much of the speeches back there, and what they did hear mostly didn't make sense to Toby. But every now and then Grandma would grab his hand tight all of a sudden, and he understood what the whole thing was about: it was because Daddy was going away again.

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His Grandma's hand was very white, with little red and tan dots in it, and big blue veins that stood out higher than the wrinkles in her skin, whenever she grabbed at his hand. Later, walking over to the towering sky-scraping rocket, he held his mother's hand; it was smooth and cool and tan, all one color, and she didn't grasp at him the way Grandma did. Later still, his father's two hands, picking him up to kiss, were bigger and darker tan than his mother's, not so smooth, and the fingers were stronger, but so strong it hurt sometimes.

They took him up in an elevator, and showed him all around the inside of the rocket, where Daddy would sit, and where all the food was stored, for emergency, they said, and the radio and everything. Then it was time to say goodbye.

Daddy was laughing at first, and Toby tried to laugh, too, but he didn't really want Daddy to go away. Daddy kissed him, and he felt like crying because it was scratchy against Daddy's cheek, and the strong fingers were hurting him now. Then Daddy stopped laughing and looked at him very seriously. "You take care of your mother, now," Daddy told him. "You're a big boy this time."

"Okay," Toby said. Last time Daddy went away in a rocket, he was not-quite-four, and they teased him with the poem in the book that said, *James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree, Took great care of his mother, though he was only three.* . . . So Toby didn't much like Daddy saying that now, because he knew they didn't really mean it.

"Okay," he said, and then because he was angry, he said, "Only she's supposed to take care of me, isn't she?"

Daddy and Mommy both laughed, and so did the two men who were standing there waiting for Daddy to get done saying goodbye to him. He wriggled, and Daddy put him down.

"I'll bring you a piece of the moon, son," Daddy said, and Toby said, "All right, fine." He reached for his mother's hand, but he found himself hanging onto Grandma instead, because Mommy and Daddy were kissing each other, and both of them had forgotten all about him.

He thought they were never going to get done kissing.

Ruth Kruger stood in the glass control booth with her son on one side of her, and Gordon Kimberly breathing heavily on the other side. *Something's wrong*, she thought, *this time something's wrong*. And then, swiftly, *I mustn't think that way!*

Jealous? she taunted herself. Do you *want* something to be wrong, just because this one isn't all yours, because Argent did some of it?

But if anything is wrong, she prayed, let it be now, right away, so he

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can't go. If anything's wrong let it be in the firing gear or the . . . what? Even now, it was too late. The beast was too big and too delicate and too precise. If something went wrong, even now, it was too late. It was . . .

You didn't finish that thought. Not if you were Ruth Kruger, and your husband was Jock Kruger, and nobody knew but the two of you how much of the courage that had gone twice round the moon, and was about to land on it, was yours. When a man knows his wife's faith is *unshakeable*, he can't help coming back. (But: "Baby! *You're* not scared, are you?")

Twice around the moon, and they called him Jumping Jock. There was never a doubt in anyone's mind who'd pilot the KIM-5, the bulky beautiful beast out there today. Kruger and Kimberly, O'Heyer and Stein. It was a combo. It won every time. *Every* time. Nothing to doubt. No room for doubt.

"Minus five . . ." someone said into a mike, and there was perfect quiet all around. "Four . . . three . . ."

(But he held me too tight, and he laughed too loud. . . .)

". . . two . . . one . . ."

(Only because he thought *I* was scared, she answered herself.)

". . . Mar —"

You didn't even hear the whole word, because the thunder-drumming roar of the beast itself split your ears.

Ringing quiet came down and she caught up Toby, held him tight, tight. . . .

"Perfect!" Gordon Kimberly sighed. "*Per*fect!"

So if anything *was* wrong, it hadn't showed up yet.

She put Toby down, then took his hand. "Come on," she said. "I'll buy you an ice-cream soda." He grinned at her. He'd been looking very strange all day, but now he looked real again. His hair had got messed up when she grabbed him.

"We're having cocktails for the press in the conference room," Kimberly said. "I think we could find something Toby would like."

"Wel-l-l-l . . ." She didn't want a cocktail, and she didn't want to talk to the press. "I think maybe we'll beg off this time. . . ."

"I think there might be some disappointment —" the man started; then Tim O'Heyer came dashing up.

"Come on, babe," he said. "Your old man told me to take personal charge while he was gone." He leered. On him it looked cute. She laughed. Then she looked down at Toby. "What would you rather, Tobe? Want to go out by ourselves, or go to the party?"

"I don't care," he said.

Tim took the boy's hand. "What we were thinking of was having a kind

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of party here, and then I think they're going to bring some dinner in, and anybody who wants to can stay up till your Daddy gets to the moon. That'll be pretty late. I guess you wouldn't want to stay up late like that, would you?"

Somebody else talking to Toby like that would be all wrong, but Tim was a friend, Toby's friend too. Ruth still didn't want to go to the party, but she remembered now that there had been plans for something like that all along, and since Toby was beginning to look eager, and it *was* important to keep the press on their side . . .

"You win, O'Heyer," she said. "Will somebody please send out for an ice-cream soda? Cherry syrup, I think it is this week . . ." She looked inquiringly at her son. ". . . and . . . *strawberry* ice cream?"

Tim shuddered. Toby nodded. Ruth smiled, and they all went in to the party.

"Well, young man!" Toby thought the redheaded man in the brown suit was probably what they called a reporter, but he wasn't sure. "How about it? You going along next time?"

"I don't know," Toby said politely. "I guess not."

"Don't you want to be a famous flier like your Daddy?" a strange woman in an evening gown asked him.

"I don't know," he muttered, and looked around for his mother, but he couldn't see her.

They kept asking him questions like that, about whether he wanted to go to the moon. Daddy said he was too little. You'd think all these people would know that much.

Jock Kruger came up swiftly out of dizzying darkness into isolation and clarity. As soon as he could move his head, before he fully remembered why, he began checking the dials and meters and flashing lights on the banked panel in front of him. He was fully aware of the ship, of its needs and strains and motion, before he came to complete consciousness of himself, his weightless body, his purpose, or his memories.

But he was aware of himself as a part of the ship before he remembered his name, so that by the time he knew he had a face and hands and innards, these parts were already occupied with feeding the beast's human brain a carefully prepared stimulant out of a nippled flask fastened in front of his head.

He pressed a button under his index finger in the arm rest of the couch that held him strapped to safety.

"Hi," he said. "Is anybody up besides me?"

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He pressed the button under his middle finger and waited.

Not for long.

"Thank God!" a voice crackled out of the loudspeaker. "You really conked out this time, Jock. Nothing wrong?"

"Not so I'd know it. You want . . . How long was I out?"

"Twenty-three minutes, eighteen seconds, takeoff to reception. Yeah. Give us a log reading."

Methodically, in order, he read off the pointers and numbers on the control panel, the colors and codes and swinging needles and quiet ones that told him how each muscle and nerve and vital organ of the great beast was taking the trip. He did it slowly and with total concentration. Then, when he was all done, there was nothing else to do except sit back and start wondering about that big blackout.

It shouldn't have happened. It never happened before. There was nothing in the compendium of information he'd just sent back to Earth to account for it.

A different ship, different . . . different men. Two and a half years different. Years of easy living and . . . growing old? Too old for this game?

Twenty-three minutes!

Last time it was under ten. The first time maybe 90 seconds more. It didn't matter, of course, not at takeoff. There was nothing for him to do then. Nothing now. Nothing for four more hours. He was there to put the beast back down on . . .

He grinned, and felt like Jock Kruger again. Identity returned complete. *This* time he was there to put the beast down where no man or beast had ever been before. This time they were going to the moon.

III

Ruth Kruger sipped at a cocktail and murmured responses to the admiring, the curious, the envious, the hopeful, and the hate-full ones who spoke to her. She was waiting for something, and after an unmeasurable stretch of time Allie Madero brought it to her.

First a big smile seeking her out across the room, so she knew it had come. Then a low-voiced confirmation.

"Wasn't it . . . an awfully long time?" she asked. She hadn't been watching the clock, on purpose, but she was sure it was longer than it should have been.

Allie stopped smiling. "Twenty-three," she said.

Ruth gasped. "What . . . ?"

"*You* figure it. I can't."

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"There's nothing in the ship. I mean nothing was changed that would account for it." She shook her head slowly. This time she didn't know the ship well enough to talk like that. There *could* be something. Oh, *Jock!* "I don't know," she said. "Too many people worked on that thing. I . . ."

"Mrs. Kruger!" It was the redheaded reporter, the obnoxious one. "We just got the report on the blackout. I'd like a statement from you, if you don't mind, as designer of the ship —"

"I am not the designer of this ship," she said coldly.

"You worked on the design, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, to the best of your knowledge . . . ?"

"To the best of my knowledge, there is no change in design to account for Mr. Kruger's prolonged unconsciousness. Had there been any such prognosis, the press would have been informed."

"Mrs. Kruger, I'd like to ask you whether you feel that the innovations made by Mr. Argent could —"

"Aw, lay off, will you?" Allie broke in, trying to be casual and kidding about it; but behind her own flaming cheeks, Ruth was aware of her friend's matching anger. "How much do you want to milk this for, anyhow? So the guy conked out an extra ten minutes. If you want somebody to crucify for it, why don't you pick on one of us who doesn't happen to be married to him?" She turned to Ruth before the man could answer. "Where's Toby? He's probably about ready to bust from cookies and carbonation."

"He's in the lounge," the reporter put in. "Or he was a few minutes —"

Ruth and Allie started off without waiting for the rest. The redhead had been talking to the kid. No telling how many of them were on top of him now.

"I thought Tim was with him," Ruth said hastily, then she thought of something, and turned back long enough to say: "For the record, Mr. . . . uh . . . I know of no criticism that can be made of any of the work done by Mr. Argent." Then she went to find her son.

There was nothing to do and nothing to see except the instrument meters and dials to check and log and check and log again. Radio stations all around Earth were beamed on him. He could have kibitzed his way to the moon, but he didn't want to. He was thinking.

Thinking back, and forward, and right in this moment. Thinking of the instant's stiffness of Ruth's body when she said she wasn't scared, and the rambling big house on the hill, and Toby politely agreeing when he offered to bring him back a piece of the moon.

Thinking of Toby growing up some day, and how little he really knew

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about his son, and what would they do, Toby and Ruth, if anything . . .

He'd never thought that way before. He'd never thought anything except to know he'd come back, because he couldn't stay away. It was always that simple. He couldn't stay away now, either. That hadn't changed. But as he sat there, silent and useless for the time, it occurred to him that he'd left something out of his calculations. *Luck*, they'd been talking about. Yes, he'd had luck. But — what was it Sue had said about a vector sum? — there was more to figure in than your own reflexes and the beast's strength. There was the *outside*. Space . . . environment . . . God . . . destiny. What difference does it make what name you give it?

He couldn't *stay* away . . . but maybe he could be *kept* away.

He'd never thought that way before.

"You tired, honey?"

"No," he said. "I'm just sick of this party. I want to go home."

"It'll be over pretty soon, Tobe. I think as long as we stayed this long, we better wait for . . . for the end of the party."

"It's a silly party. You said you'd buy me an ice-cream soda."

"I did, darling," she said patiently. "At least, if I didn't *buy* it, I got it for you. You had it, didn't you?"

"Yes, but you *said* we'd go *out* and have one."

"Look. Why don't you just put your head down on my lap and . . ."

"I'm no *baby!* Anyhow I'm not tired."

"All right. We'll go pretty soon. You just sit here on the couch, and you don't have to talk to anybody if you don't feel like it. I'll tell you what. I'll go find you a magazine or a book or something to look at, and —"

"I don't *want* a magazine. I want my own book with the pirates in it."

"You just stay put a minute, so I can find you. I'll bring you something."

She got up and went out to the other part of the building where the officers were, and collected an assortment of leaflets and folders with shiny bright pictures of mail rockets and freight transports and jets and visionary moon rocket designs, and took them back to the little lounge where she'd left him.

She looked at the clock on the way. Twenty-seven more minutes. There was *no* reason to believe that anything was wrong.

They were falling now. A man's body is not equipped to sense direction *toward* or *from*, *up* or *down*, without the help of landmarks or gravity. But the body of the beast was designed to know such things; and Kruger, at the nerve center, knew everything the beast knew.

Ship is extension of self, and self is — extension or limitation? — of ship.

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If Jock Kruger is the center of the universe — remember the late night after the party, and picking Toby off the floor? — then ship is extension of self, and the man is the brain of the beast. But if ship *is* universe — certainly continuum; that's universe, isn't it? — then the weakling man-thing in the couch is a limiting condition of the universe. A human brake. He was there to make it stop when it didn't "want" to.

Suppose it wouldn't stop? Suppose it had decided to be a self-determined, free-willed universe?

Jock grinned, and started setting controls. His time was coming. It was measurable in minutes, and then in seconds . . . *now!*

His hand reached for the firing lever (but *what* was she scared of?), groped, and touched, hesitated, clasped, and pulled.

Grown-up parties at home were fun. But other places, like this one, they were silly. Toby half-woke-up on the way home, enough to realize his Uncle Tim was driving them, and they weren't in their own car. He was sitting on the front seat next to his mother, with his head against her side, and her arm around him. He tried to come all the way awake, to listen to what they were saying, but they weren't talking, so he started to go back to sleep.

Then Uncle Tim said, "For God's sake, Ruth, he's safe, and whatever happened certainly wasn't *your* fault. He's got enough supplies to hold out till . . ."

"Shh!" his mother said sharply, and then, whispering, "I know."

Now he remembered.

"Mommy . . ."

"Yes, hon?"

"Did Daddy go to the moon all right?"

"Y . . . yes, dear."

Her voice was funny.

"Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The moon."

"Oh. We can't see it now, darling. It's around the other side of the earth."

"Well, when is he going to come *back?*"

Silence.

"*Mom*my . . . *when?*"

"As soon as . . . just as soon as he can, darling. Now go to sleep."

And now the moon was up, high in the sky, a gilded football dangling from Somebody's black serge lapel. When she was a little girl, she used to

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say she loved the man in the moon, and now the man in the moon loved her too, but if she was a little girl still, somebody would tuck her into bed, and pat her head and tell her to go to sleep, and she would sleep as easy, breathe as soft, as Toby did. . . .

But she wasn't a little girl, she was all grown up, and she married the man, the man in the moon, and sleep could come and sleep could go, but sleep could never stay with her while the moonwash swept the window panes.

She stood at the open window and wrote a letter in her mind and sent it up the path of light to the man in the moon. It said:

"Dear Jock: Tim says it wasn't my fault, and I can't explain it even to him. I'm sorry, darling. Please to stay alive till we can get to you. Faithfully yours, Cassandra."

IV

The glasses and ashes and litter and spilled drinks had all been cleared away. The table top gleamed in polished stripes of light and dark, where the light came through the louvered plastic of the wall. The big chairs were empty, waiting, and at each place, arranged with the precision of a formal dinner-setting, was the inevitable pad of yellow paper, two freshly-sharpened pencils, a small neat pile of typed white sheets of paper, a small glass ashtray and a shining empty water glass. Down the center of the table, spaced for comfort, three crystal pitchers of ice and water stood in perfect alignment.

Ruth was the first one there. She stood in front of a chair, fingering the little stack of paper on which someone (Allie? She'd have had to be up early to get it done so quickly) had tabulated the details of yesterday's events. "To refresh your memory," was how they always put it.

She poured a glass of water, and guiltily replaced the pitcher on the exact spot where it had been; lit a cigarette, and stared with dismay at the burnt match marring the cleanliness of the little ashtray; pulled her chair in beneath her and winced at the screech of the wooden leg across the floor.

Get it over with! She picked up the typed pages, and glanced at them. Two at the bottom were headed "Recommendations of U.S. Rocket Corps to Facilitate Construction of KIM-VIII." That could wait. The three top sheets she'd better get through while she was still alone.

She read slowly and carefully, trying to memorize each sentence, so that when the time came to talk, she could think of what had happened this way, from outside, instead of remembering how it had been for *her*.

There was nothing in the report that she didn't already know.

Jock Kruger had set out in the KIM-VII at 5:39 P.M., C.S.T., just at sunset. First report after recovery from blackout came at 6:02-plus. First log

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readings gave no reason to anticipate any difficulty. Subsequent reports and radioed log readings were, for Kruger, unusually terse and formal, and surprisingly infrequent; but earth-to-ship contact at twenty-minute intervals had been acknowledged. No reason to believe Kruger was having trouble at any time during the trip.

At 11:54, an attempt to call the ship went unanswered for 56 seconds. The radioman here described Kruger's voice as "irritable" when the reply finally came, but all he said was, "Sorry. I was firing the first brake." Then a string of figures, and a quick log reading — everything just what you'd expect.

Earth acknowledged, and waited.

Eighteen seconds later:

"Second brake." More figures. Again, everything as it should be. But twenty seconds after that call was completed:

"This is Kruger. Anything wrong with the dope I gave you?"

"Earth to Kruger. Everything okay in our book. Trouble?"

"Track me, boy. I'm off."

"You want a course correction?"

"I can figure it quicker here. I'll keep talking as I go. Stop me if I'm wrong by your book." More figures, and Kruger's calculations coincided perfectly with the swift work done at the base. Both sides came to the same conclusion, and both sides knew what it meant. The man in the beast fired once more, and once again, and made a landing.

There was no reason to believe that either ship or pilot had been hurt. There was no way of finding out. By the best calculations, they were five degrees of arc around onto the dark side. And there was no possibility at all, after that second corrective firing that Kruger had enough fuel left to take off again. The last thing Earth had heard, before the edge of the moon cut off Kruger's radio, was:

"Sorry, boys. I guess I fouled up this time. Looks like you'll have to come and . . ."

One by one, they filled the seats: Gordon Kimberly at one end, and the Colonel at the other; Tim O'Heyer to one side of Kimberly, and Ruth at the other; Allie, with her pad and pencil poised, alongside Tim; the Colonel's aide next down the line, with his little silent stenotype in front of him; the Steins across from him, next to Ruth. With a minimum of formality, Kimberly opened the meeting and introduced Col. Swenson.

The Colonel cleared his throat. "I'd like to make something clear," he said. "Right from the start, I want to make this clear. I'm here to help. Not to get in the way. My presence does not indicate any — *criticism* on the part of the Armed Services. We are entirely satisfied with the work you people

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have been doing." He cleared his throat again, and Kimberly put in:

"You saw our plans, I believe, Colonel. Everything was checked and approved by your outfit ahead of time."

"Exactly. We had no criticism then, and we have none now. The rocket program is what's important. Getting Kruger back is important, not just for ordinary humanitarian reasons — pardon me, Mrs. Kruger, if I'm too blunt — but for the sake of the whole program. Public opinion, for one thing. That's your line, isn't it, Mr. O'Heyer? And then, *we have to find out what happened!*

"I came down here today to offer any help we can give you on the relief ship, and to make a suggestion to facilitate matters."

He paused deliberately this time.

"Go ahead, Colonel," Tim said. "We're listening."

"Briefly, the proposal is that you all accept temporary commissions while the project is going on. Part of that report in front of you embodies the details of the plan. I hope you'll find it acceptable. You all know there is a great deal of — necessary, I'm afraid — *red tape*, you'd call it, and 'going through channels,' and such in the Services. It makes cooperation between civilian and military groups difficult. If we can all get together as one outfit 'for the duration,' so to speak . . ."

This time nobody jumped into the silence. The Colonel cleared his throat once more.

"Perhaps you'd best read the full report before we discuss it any further. I brought the matter up now just to — to let you know the *attitude* with which we are submitting the proposal to you . . ."

"Thank you, Colonel." O'Heyer saved him. "I've already had a chance to look at the report. Don't know that anyone else has, except of course Miss Madero. But I personally, at least, appreciate your attitude. And I think I can speak for Mr. Kimberly too. . . ."

He looked sideways at his boss; Gordon nodded.

"What I'd like to suggest now," O'Heyer went on, "since I've seen the report already, and I believe everyone else would like to have a chance to bone up some — perhaps you'd like to have a first-hand look at some of our plant, Colonel? I could take you around a bit. . . . ?"

"Thank you. I would like to." The officer stood up, his gold Rocket Corps uniform blazing in the louvered light. "If I may say so, Mr. O'Heyer, you seem remarkably sensible, for a — well, a *publicity* man."

"That's all right, Colonel." Tim laughed easily. "I don't even think it's a dirty word. You seem like an all-right guy yourself — for an *officer*, that is."

They all laughed then, and Tim led the blaze of glory out of the room while the rest of them settled down to studying the R.C. proposals. When

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they had all finished, Kimberly spoke slowly, voicing the general reaction: "I hate to admit it, but it makes sense."

"They're being pretty decent about it, aren't they?" Ben said. "Putting it to us as a proposal instead of pulling a lot of weight."

He nodded. "I've had a little contact with this man Swenson before. He's a good man to work with. It . . . makes sense, that's all."

"On paper, anyhow," Sue put in.

"Well, Ruth . . ." the big man turned to her, waiting. "You haven't said anything."

"I . . . it seems all right to me," she said, and added: "Frankly, Gordon, I don't know that I ought to speak at all. I'm not quite sure why I'm here."

Allie looked up sharply, questioning, from her notes; Sue pushed back her chair and half-stood. "My God, you're not going to back out on us now?"

"I . . . look, you all know I didn't do any of the real work on the last one. It was Andy Argent's job, and a good one. I've got Toby to think about, and . . ."

"Kid, we *need* you," Sue protested. "Argent can't do this one; this is going to be another Three, only more so. Unmanned, remote-control stuff, and no returning atmosphere-landing problems. This is up your alley. It's . . ." She sank back; there was nothing else to say.

"That's true, Ruth." Tim had come back in during the last outburst. Now he sat down. "Speed is what counts, gal. That's why we're letting the gold braid in on the job — we are, aren't we?" Kimberly nodded; Tim went on: "With you on the job, we've got a working team. With somebody new — well, you know what a ruckus we had until Sue got used to Argent's blueprints, and how Ben's pencil notes used to drive Andy wild. And we can't even use him this time. It's not his field. He did do a good job, but we'd have to start in with somebody new all over again . . ." He broke off, and looked at Kimberly.

"I hope you'll decide to work with us, Ruth," he said simply.

"If . . . obviously, if it's the best way to get it done *quick*, I will," she said. "Twenty-eight hours a day if you like."

Tim grinned. "I guess we can let the braid back in now . . . ?" He got up and went to the door.

Another Three, only more so . . . Sue's words danced in her mind while the Colonel and the Colonel's aide marched in, and took their places, while voices murmured politely, exchanging good will.

Another Three — the first ship she had designed for Kimberly. The ship that made her rich and famous, but that was nothing, because it was the

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ship that brought Jock to her, that made him write the letter, that made her meet him, that led to the Five and Six and now . . .

"I've got some ideas for a manned ship," he'd written. "If we could get together to discuss it some time . . ."

". . . pleasure to know you'll be working with us, Mrs. Kruger." She shook her head sharply, and located in time and place.

"Thank you, Colonel. I want to do what I can, of course. . . ."

V

James James Morrison's mother put on a golden gown . . .

Toby knew the whole thing, almost, by heart. The little boy in the poem *told* his mother not to *go down to the end of the town*, wherever that was, unless she took him along. And she said she wouldn't, but she put on that golden gown and went, and thought she'd be back in time for tea. Only she wasn't. She never came back at all. *Last seen wandering vaguely . . . King John said he was sorry . . .*

Who's King John? And what time is tea?

Toby sat quietly beside his mother on the front seat of the car, and looked obliquely at the golden uniform she wore, and could not find a way to ask the questions in his mind.

Where was James James's *father?* Why did James James have to be the one to keep his mother from going down to the end of the town?

"Are you in the Army now, Mommy?" he asked.

"Well . . . sort of. But not for long, darling. Just till Daddy comes home."

"When is Daddy coming home?"

"Soon. Soon, I hope. Not too long."

She didn't sound right. Her voice had a cracking sound like Grandma's, and other old ladies. She didn't look right, either, in that golden-gown uniform. When she kissed him goodbye in front of the school, she didn't *feel* right. She didn't even *smell* the same as she used to.

" 'Bye, boy. See you tonight," she said — the same words she always said, but they sounded different.

" 'Bye." He walked up the driveway and up the front steps and down the corridor and into the pretty-painted room where his teacher was waiting. Miss Callahan was nice. Today she was *too* nice. The other kids teased him, and called him teacher's pet. At lunch time he went back in the room before anybody else did, and made pictures all over the floor with the colored chalk. It was the worst thing he could think of to do. Miss Callahan made him wash it all up, and she wasn't nice any more for the rest of the afternoon.

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When he went out front after school, he couldn't see the car anywhere. It was true then. His mother had put on that golden gown, and now she was gone. Then he saw Grandma waving to him out of *her* car, and he remembered Mommy had said Grandma would come and get him. He got in the car, and she grabbed at him like she always did. He pulled away.

"Is Daddy home yet?" he asked.

Grandma started the car. "Not yet," she said, and she was crying. He didn't dare ask about Mommy after that, but she wasn't home when they got there. It was a long time after that till dinner was ready.

She came home for dinner, though.

"You have to allow for the human factor. . . ."

Nobody had said it to her, of course. Nobody would. She wondered how much tougher it made the job for everybody, having her around. She wondered how she'd stay sane, if she didn't have the job to do.

Thank God Toby was in school now! She couldn't do it, if it meant leaving him with someone else all day — even his grandmother. As it was, having the old lady in the house so much was nerve-racking.

I ought to ask her if she'd like to sleep here for a while, Ruth thought, and shivered. Dinner time was enough.

Anyhow, Toby liked having her there, and that's what counted.

I'll have to go in and see his teacher. Tomorrow, she thought. I've got to make time for it tomorrow. Let her know . . . but of course she knew. Jock Kruger's family's affairs were hardly private. Just the same, I better talk to her. . . .

Ruth got out of bed and stood at the window, waiting for the moon. Another ten minutes, fifteen, twenty maybe, and it would edge over the hills on the other side of town. The white hands on the clock said 2:40. She had to get some sleep. She couldn't stand here waiting for the moon. Get to sleep now, before it comes up. That's better. . . .

Oh, *Jock!*

". . . the human factor . . ." They didn't know. She wanted to go tell them all, find somebody right away, and shout it. "*It's not his fault. I did it!*"

"You're *not scared, are you, baby?*"

Oh, no! No, no! Don't be silly. Who, me? Just stiff and trembling. The cold, you know . . . ?

Stop that!

She stood at the window, waiting for the moon, the man, the man in the moon.

Human factor . . . well, there wouldn't be a human factor in this one. If she went out to the field on takeoff day and told KIM-VIII she was

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scared, it wouldn't matter at all.

Thank God I can do something, at least!

Abruptly, she closed the blind, so she wouldn't know when it came, and pulled out the envelope she'd brought home; switched on the bed light, and unfolded the first blueprints.

It was all familiar. Just small changes here and there. Otherwise, it was the Three all over again — the first unmanned ship to be landed successfully on the moon surface. The only important difference was that this one had to have some fancy gadgetry on the landing mech. Stein had given her the orbit calcs today. The rest of the job was hers and Sue's: design and production. Between them, they could do it. What they needed was a goldberg that would take the thing once around low enough to contact Jock, if . . . to contact him, that's all. Then back again, prepared for him to take over the landing by remote, according to instructions, if he wanted to. If he could. If his radio was working. If . . .

Twice around, and then down where they figured he was, if he hadn't tried to bring it down himself.

It was complicated, but only quantitatively. Nothing basically new, or untried. And no *human* factors to be allowed for, once it was off the ground.

She fell asleep, finally, with the light still on, and the blind drawn, and the blueprints spread out on the floor next to the bed.

Every day, she drove him to school, dressed in her golden gown. And every afternoon, he waited, telling himself she was sure to come home.

That was a very silly little poem, and he wasn't three, he was six now.

But it was a long time since Daddy went away.

"I'd rather not," she said stiffly.

"I'm sorry, Ruth. I know — well, I *don't* know, but I can imagine how you feel. I hate to ask it, but if you can do it at all . . . just be there and look confident, and . . . *you* know."

Look confident! I couldn't do it for Jock, she thought; why should I do it for *them?* But of course that was silly. They didn't know her the way Jock did. They couldn't read her smiles, or sense a barely present stiffness, or know anything except what she chose to show on the front of her face.

"Look confident? What difference does it make, Tim? If the thing works, they'll all know soon enough. If . . ."

She stopped.

"All right, I'll be blunt. If it *doesn't* work, it's going to make a hell of a difference what the public feeling was at the time it went off. If we have to try again. If — damn it, you want it straight, all right! If we can't save

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Jock, we're not going to give up the whole thing! We're not going to let space travel wait another half century while the psychological effects wear off. *And Jock wouldn't want us to!* Don't forget that. It was his dream, too. It was yours, once upon a time. If . . ."

"All *right!*" She was startled by her voice. She was screaming, or almost.

"All right," she said bitterly, more quietly. "If you think I'll be holding up progress for fifty years by not dragging Toby along to a launching, I'll come."

"Oh, Ruth, I'm sorry. No, it's not that important. And I had no business talking that way. But listen, babe, you used to understand this — the way I feel, the way Jock fel — feels. Even a guy like Kimberly. You used to feel it too. Look: the single item of you showing your face at the takeoff doesn't amount to much. Neither does one ounce of fuel. But either one could be the little bit that makes the difference. Kid, we got to put *everything* we've got behind it this time."

"All right," she said again. "I told you I'd come."

"You do understand, don't you?" he pleaded.

"I don't know, Tim. I'm not sure I do. But you're right. I would have, once. Maybe — I don't know. It's different for a woman, I guess. But I'll come. Don't worry about it."

She turned and started out.

"Thanks, Ruth. And I *am* sorry. Uh — want me to come and pick you up?"

She nodded. "Thanks." She was glad she wouldn't have to drive.

VI

He kept waiting for a chance to ask her. He couldn't do it in the house before they left, because right after she told him where they were going, she went to get dressed in her golden uniform, and he had to stay with Grandma all the time.

Then Mr. O'Heyer came with the car, and he couldn't ask because, even though he sat up front with Mommy, Mr. O'Heyer was there too.

When they got to the launching field, there were people around all the time. Once he tried to get her off by himself, but all she did was think he had to go to the bathroom. Then, bit by bit, he didn't *have* to ask, because he could tell from the way they were all talking, and the way the cameras were all pointed at her all the time, like they had been at Daddy the other time.

Then there was the speeches part again, and this time *she* got up and talked, so that settled it.

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He was glad he hadn't asked. They probably all thought he knew. Maybe they'd even told him, and he'd forgotten, like he sometimes did. "Mommy," he listened to himself in his mind, "Mommy, are you going to the moon too?" Wouldn't that sound silly!

She'd come back for him, he told himself. The other times, when Daddy went some place — like when they first came here to live, and Daddy went first, then Mommy, and then they came back to get him, and some other time, he didn't remember just what — but when Daddy went away, Mommy always went to stay with him, and then they *always* came to get him too.

It wasn't any different from Mommy going back to be with Daddy at a party or something, instead of staying in his room to talk to him when she put him to bed. It didn't feel any worse than that, he told himself.

Only he didn't believe himself.

She never did tell me! I wouldn't of forgotten that! She should *of told me!*

She did not want to make a speech. Nobody had warned her that she would be called upon to make a speech. It was bad enough trying to answer reporters coherently. She stood up and went forward to the microphone dutifully, and shook hands with the President of the United States, and tried to look confident. She opened her mouth and nothing came out.

"Thank you," she said finally, though she didn't know just what for. "You've all been very kind." She turned to the mike, and spoke directly into it. "I feel that a good deal of honor is being accorded me today which is not rightfully mine. We gave ourselves a two-month limit to complete a job, and the fact that it was finished inside of six weeks instead . . ."

She had to stop because everybody was cheering, and they wouldn't have heard her.

". . . that fact is not something for which the designer of a ship can be thanked. The credit is due to all the people at Kimberly who worked so hard, and to the Rocket Corps personnel who helped so much. I think . . ."

This time she paused to find the right words. It had suddenly become very important to level with the crowd, to tell them what she honestly felt.

"I think it is I who should be doing the thanking. I happen to be a designer of rockets, but much more importantly, to me, I am Jock Kruger's wife. So I want to thank everyone who helped . . ."

Grandma's hand tightened around his, and then pulled away to get a handkerchief, because she was crying. Right up here on the platform! Then he realized what Mommy had just said. She said that being Jock Kruger's wife was more important to her than anything else.

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It was funny that Grandma should feel bad about that. Everybody else seemed to think it was a right thing to say, the way they were yelling and clapping and shouting. It occurred to Toby with a small shock of surprise that maybe Grandma sometimes felt bad about things the same way he did.

He was sort of sorry he wouldn't have much chance to find out more about that.

She broke away from the reporters and V.I.P.'s, and went and got Toby, and asked him did he want to look inside the rocket before it left.

He nodded. He was certainly being quiet today. Poor kid — he must be pretty mixed up about the whole thing by now.

She tried to figure out what was going on inside the small brown head, but all she could think of was how *much* like Jock he looked today.

She took him up the elevator inside the rocket. There wasn't much room to move around, of course, but they'd rigged it so that all the big shots who were there could have a look. She was a little startled to see the President and her mother-in-law come up together in the next elevator, but between trying to answer Toby's questions, and trying to brush off reporters, she didn't have much time to be concerned about such oddities.

She had never seen Toby so intent on anything. He wanted to know *everything*. Where's this, and what's that for? And where are you going to sit, Mommy?

"I'm not, hon. You know that. There isn't room in this rocket for . . ."

"Mrs. Kruger, pardon me, but . . ."

"Just a minute, *please*."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"What was it you wanted to know now, Tobe?" There were too many people; there was too much talk. She felt slightly dizzy. "Look, hon, I want to go on down." It was hard to talk. She saw Mrs. Kruger on the ramp, and called her, and left Toby with her. Down at the bottom, she saw Sue Stein, and asked her if she'd go take over with Toby and try to answer his questions.

"Sure. Feeling rocky, kid?"

"Kind of." She tried to smile.

"You better go lie down. Maybe Allie can get something for you. I saw her over there. . . ." She waved a vague hand. "You look like hell, kid. Better lie down." Then she rushed off.

He got away from Grandma when Sue Stein came and said Mother wanted her to show him everything. Then he said he was tired and got away from *her*. He could find his Grandma all right, he said.

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He'd found the spot he wanted. He could just about wriggle into it, he thought.

The loudspeaker crackled over her head. Five minutes now.

The other women who'd been fixing their hair and brightening their lipstick snapped their bags shut and took a last look and ran out, to find places where they could see everything. Ruth stretched out on the couch and closed her eyes. Five minutes now, by herself, to get used to the idea that the job was done.

She had done everything she could do, including coming here today. There was nothing further she could do. From now on, or in five minutes' time, it was out of anyone's hands, but — Whose? And Jock's, of course. Once the relief rocket got there, it was up to him.

If it got there.

If he was there for it to get to.

The way they had worked it, there was a chance at least they'd know the answer in an hour's time. If the rocket made its orbit once, and only once, it would mean he was alive and well and in control of his own ship, with the radio working, and . . .

And if it made a second orbit, there was still hope. It *might* mean nothing worse than that his radio was out. But that way they would have to wait . . .

God! It could take months, if the calculations as to where he'd come down were not quite right. If . . . *if* a million little things that would make it harder to get the fuel from one rocket to the other.

But if they only saw one orbit . . .

For the first time, she let herself, forced herself to, consider the possibility that Jock was dead. That he would not come back.

He's not dead, she thought. I'd know it if he was. Like I knew something was wrong last time. Like I'd know it now if . . .

"Sixty seconds before zero," said the speaker.

But there is! She sat bolt upright, not tired or dizzy any more. Now she had faced it, she didn't feel confused. There was something . . . something dreadfully *wrong*. . . .

She ran out, and as she came on to the open field, the speaker was saying, "Fifty-one."

She ran to the edge of the crowd, and couldn't get through, and had to run, keep running, around the edges, to find the aisle between the cords.

Stop it! she screamed, but not out loud, because she had to use all her breath for running.

And while she ran, she tried to think.

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"Minus forty-seven."

She couldn't make them stop without a reason. They'd think she was hysterical . . .

". . . forty-five . . ."

Maybe she was, at that. Coolly, her mind considered the idea and rejected it. No; there was a problem that hadn't been solved, a question she hadn't answered.

But *what* problem? What . . .

"Minus forty."

She dashed down between the ropes, toward the control booth. The guard stepped forward, then recognized her, and stepped back. The corridor between the packed crowds went on forever.

"Minus thirty-nine . . . eight . . . thirty-seven."

She stopped outside the door of Control, and tried to think, think, *think!* What *was* it? What could she tell them? How could she convince them? *She knew*, but they'd want to know what, why . . .

You just didn't change plans at a moment like this.

But if they fired the rocket before she figured it out, before she remembered the problem, and then found an answer, it was as good as murdering Jock. They could never get another one up quickly enough if anything went wrong this time.

She pushed open the door.

"Stop!" she said. "Listen, you've got to stop. Wait! There's something . . ."

Tim O'Heyer came and took her arm, and smiled and said something. Something soothing.

"Minus nineteen," somebody said into a microphone, quietly.

She kept trying to explain, and Tim kept talking at her, and when she tried to pull away she realized the hand on her arm wasn't just there to comfort her. He was keeping her from making trouble. He . . .

Oh, God! If there was just some way to make them understand! If she could only remember *what* was wrong . . .

"Minus three . . . two . . ."

It was no use.

She stopped fighting, caught her breath, stood still, and saw Tim's approving smile, as the word and the flare went off together:

"*Mark!*"

Then, in a dead calm, she looked around and saw Sue.

"Where's Toby?" she asked.

She was looking in the reserved grandstand seats for Mrs. Kruger, when she heard the crowd sigh, and looked up and saw it happening.

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VII

The crash fire did not damage the inside of the rocket at all. The cause of the crash was self-evident, as soon as they found Toby Kruger's body wedged into the empty space between the outer hull of the third stage, and the inner hull of the second.

The headlines were not as bad as might have been expected. Whether it was the tired and unholy calm on Ruth Kruger's face that restrained them, or Tim O'Heyer's emergency-reserve supply of Irish whisky that convinced them, the newsmen took it easy on the story. All America couldn't attend the funeral, but a representative hundred thousand citizens mobbed the streets when the boy was buried; the other hundred and eighty million saw the ceremonies more intimately on their TV sets.

Nobody who heard the quiet words spoken over the fresh grave — a historic piece of poetry to which the author, O'Heyer, could never sign his name — nobody who heard that simple speech remained entirely unmoved. Just where or when or with whom the movement started is still not known; probably it began spontaneously in a thousand different homes during the brief ceremony; maybe O'Heyer had something to do with that part of it, too. Whichever way, the money started coming in, by wire, twenty minutes afterwards; and by the end of the week "Bring Jock Back" was denting more paychecks than the numbers racket and the nylon industry combined.

The KIM-IX was finished in a month. They didn't have Ruth Kruger to design this time, but they didn't need her: the KIM-VIII plans were still good. O'Heyer managed to keep the sleeping-pill story down to a tiny back-page notice in most of the papers, and the funeral was not televised.

Later, they brought back the perfectly preserved, emaciated body of Jock Kruger, and laid him to rest next to his wife and son. He had been a good pilot and an ingenious man. The moon couldn't kill him; it took starvation to do that.

They made an international shrine of the house, and the garden where the three graves lay.

Now they are talking of making an interplanetary shrine of the lonely rocket on the wrong side of the moon.

OBSERVE UNITED NATIONS DAY
OCTOBER 24th

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Since you are at the moment looking at this printed page, it can be concluded that you, *at any rate, spend a certain amount of time away from a television screen. But such decadent practices of an earlier culture may not be long for this world; let Larry Siegel tell you how TV-watching may become, not merely a habit, but a sport and even an art.*

Dead-Eye Daniel

by LARRY SIEGEL

YOU BUY US another round, and I'll *really* tell you a story. This one's about Dead-Eye Daniel — the guy they used to call The Greatest TV-Watcher In The World.

Now this is what I call an amazing tale, and may I turn as purple as a Martian if every word of it isn't true. . . .

No, thanks, I'll take it straight — with a little water on the side. . . .

Well, the whole thing started about 40 years ago — back in 1958. That was the year Mike Munro and I discovered Daniel, and inside of twelve months, we not only made him a world-famous figure, we also coached him for that contest with Nikolai Kopkov, which turned out to be one of the most fantastic TV-watching matches of all time — But I'll start this from the beginning.

First, a word about Nikolai Kopkov. He was the Russian UN delegate from 1955 to 1959. Those were the years that the United Nations was trying to seat Grubonia, a small country in East Asia, but Russia refused to recognize her. For some wild reason, they insisted it was a secret anti-Communist arsenal that was planning an atomic attack on the Soviet Union. Even though the UN investigated the matter and found the largest weapon in Grubonia to be an oversized spear, Russia refused to back down.

Well, Kopkov had a merry old time in those days. Whenever the chairman of the Security Council asked for a show of hands from those nations in favor of seating Grubonia, he would automatically shout, "NYET!" leap to his feet and walk out of the hall. From '55 to '59 he walked out 91 times — an all-time record.

But Kopkov was also a great man at a TV set, and I'll come to that later.

TV, in case you didn't know it, first came out in the mid '40's. You

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probably won't believe it, but before television was around, people used to visit places called libraries (they were nothing but big halls that held books), parks (large sections set aside so that people could — of all things — sit on the grass, lie under trees, and row on lakes), and other nonsense like that.

Other folks (and so help me, this is true!) used to spend hours visiting friends and relatives — and get this — doing absolutely nothing but talk!

Of course, after TV really set in, things became normal. By 1957, husbands were paying little attention to wives, mothers were ignoring kids, and kids rarely left their living rooms — except in emergencies, like fires and stuff. You know, the way it is now. We take care of our basic needs, and spend all the rest of the time watching TV or talking about it.

Well, I was Mike's right-hand man in those days. He was quite a character — short, wiry, about 35, with a brain like a souped-up jet. Mike was the greatest showman since that snake staged his apple-eating show in the Garden.

Just to give you an idea of his amazing talent, in '54 he jammed 19,000 in the Chicago Garden for an International Chicken-Plucking Tournament. And in '55 he drew 100,000 people away from TV for an evening and packed them into the Los Angeles Coliseum for the Western Fruit-Pickers Reunion Dance. He did a lot more, but I think you see what I mean.

Anyhow, one day in November, '58, Mike and I were driving across country, heading for Denver, Colo., where he was planning a big TV promotion deal. All of a sudden, outside of a little town in Illinois called Zuweika, our Cadillac broke down. Neither of us knew anything about car mechanics, so we got out and headed for a nearby house — the only one in sight.

We knocked on the door and a middle-aged woman admitted us. We told her our troubles, and she said there wasn't another house or garage within miles, and her phone was out of order.

"But," she said, "my husband, Daniel, inside, is a fine mechanic. He'll help you."

"Good," said Mike. "Would you please call him out and tell him we'll pay him well for his service?"

She nodded. "I'll speak to him at six o'clock. He won't do anything before then anyway."

"Six!" I said. "But it's only three o'clock now. We have more important things to do than sit around for three hours!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "He's watching TV now," she said. "He started at noon, and nothing on earth will budge him from that set before six."

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"Madam," said Mike, "in this TV age we live in, we all devote long hours to our sets. But there are always things that can draw us away from them for a little while."

With that he took out a roll of hundreds that staggered her. But she recovered quickly and said, "You don't understand. When he's watching TV he don't see nobody and he don't hear nobody. He's in a combination trance and deep freeze. On Tuesdays — which is today — he won't come out of it till six."

Mike was an impatient man, and also rude at times. He walked right past her into the living room with me right behind him. We saw a heavy-set fellow, around 50 or so, staring at a large TV set that stood in a corner.

We didn't say anything for a while; we just stared at him. I guess we must have stood there for a half hour, and what we saw was unbelievable! He went through a drama and two commercials without blinking, shifting his eyes, or moving his body. I would have given even money the guy was dead.

When the program changed and a UN meeting came on the screen, Mike walked over to him, bent over, and shouted in his ear. No reaction. He waited a few minutes and then screamed in his other ear. No response whatsoever.

Mike scratched his head for a while. Then he took out a hundred-dollar bill and waved it in Daniel's face. He might as well have done the same thing across the street, or in Oregon. The guy never saw the money.

On the screen the meeting reached a climax. The chairman called for a vote on the seating of Grubonia, and as usual Russia's Kopkov walked out of the hall. Daniel stared on, without blinking, without moving, but still breathing — I think.

I could see Mike was getting desperate, and when *he* got desperate, peculiar things happened. He didn't disappoint me. He took off his shoes, jumped on a table right next to the TV set, and went into a silly dance while he slowly removed his clothes. It was the strangest thing I ever saw in my life. But so help me, Daniel never lifted his eyes from the screen to look at him.

Mike jumped from the table in his shorts and ran over to me with a mad look in his eye. "Gil!" he shouted. "I've got it! This is it! Absolutely the greatest!"

"What are you jabbering about?" I asked.

"It's a miracle!" he cried, throwing on his clothes. "We've got a million-dollar TV miracle tossed right in our foolish faces!"

"What the devil are you driving at?" I asked.

"Damn it!" he said. "It's obvious! We've got the champion TV-watcher

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in the world here. A man who can out-look and out-last any human being on earth! The Jack Dempsey of the TV-watchers! The Babe Ruth of the TV-watchers! We'll make a fortune. My God, as sure as I know my public, we're made!"

One thing I learned through the years — don't ever question Mike's brainstorms. Just follow them and make money. But frankly, I thought he had lost his skull matter this time.

At 6 o'clock on the dot Daniel came out of his TV trance. He yawned, turned off the set, and noticed us for the first time. We introduced ourselves and shook hands. Then he started talking about the shows he had seen.

Finally he turned to his wife. "Clara," he said, "cook me up about six lamb chops. Man, TV-watching can sure make a guy hungry. You gentlemen hungry? We got plenty of food in the house."

But Mike wasn't in an eating mood. He followed Daniel into the kitchen and immediately outlined a plan to him. As Mike spoke, he started taking out hundred-dollar bills, and Daniel, who was putting away what seemed like a cow, a bushel of potatoes, and a barrel of beer, had to keep pushing his eyeballs back into his head when he saw the money.

I don't think Daniel understood completely what Mike was talking about (I know *I* didn't). But he didn't seem to care. He just kept nodding, eating, and watching the money.

In an hour a deal was made. Daniel and his wife packed some clothes and locked up the house. He fixed our car and Mike, forgetting Denver completely, zoomed into Chicago. We left the car and grabbed a plane for New York. We went immediately to Mike's Long Island estate. And then the weird machinery in his head started operating.

He called up all the newspapers, wire services, and TV newsreels. He told them all to come to his home at noon to cover "the most fantastic TV story of the century." They came all right. Mike had been supplying them with the best copy in the country for years and they knew he would never steer them wrong.

At noon the house was packed with reporters, photographers, and cameramen. Then Mike walked in with Daniel, who was still chewing the final tidbits of a ten-course steak dinner ("A man's got to eat and eat good before and after a good TV session," he kept telling us). Daniel sat down in front of the television set, completely ignored the crowd, emptied half a box of candy he saw on a nearby table, and then he relaxed.

Well, for five hours he looked at the TV screen. The press people hollered at him, insulted him, waved things in his eyes, and did everything but assault him. But his eyes never blinked for more than a half second or moved once from the picture!

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The next day the streets exploded with newsprint and the story was sprayed by TV all over the world. "I watched the greatest TV-watcher of all time. . . ." began one account. "What Babe Ruth was to baseball, what Joe Louis was to boxing, that's what Dead-Eye Daniel is to TV-watching. . . ." started another.

From the letters and phone calls that came pouring in, we could see the public was thoroughly aroused.

So Mike made his next move.

He set up a full page ad, which he placed in the largest papers in the country, and which he flashed on TV screens as a regular commercial. On the top of the page was a picture of Daniel looking at a TV screen. In bold letters underneath were the words: "The Greatest TV-Watcher In The World Challenges You!" The copy explained how Daniel would soon be making a nation-wide tour, at which time he would challenge anybody who thought he could outlast him in front of a TV set.

At the bottom of the page, Mike outlined the rules of his new game. I have a copy here in my wallet. I'll read them to you:

1. Contest open to people of all ages and both sexes.
2. TV screens must be no smaller than 10 inches or larger than 30.
3. Contestants may sit no farther than 12 feet away from the set.
4. Contestants may look at any TV channel except the one that is televising the match itself; but each channel, once chosen, may not be changed for the duration of the contest.
5. Three judges shall be assigned to each contestant. They shall be responsible for maintaining the perfect tuning of his picture, and shall determine whether or not a contestant's eyes are firmly on the screen at all times.
6. If the judges decide his eyes ever leave the screen, he shall be disqualified.
7. Blinking is permitted, but the contestant's eyes can never be closed longer than a second. Anything longer than that is grounds for disqualification.
8. The audience may yell, jeer, and use any means of verbal attack to upset and distract the contestants, so long as remarks are in good taste. The judges shall decide that matter. Any physical contact between audience and contestants is forbidden.
9. In case a set breaks down, or a contestant's eyes are forced to leave the screen because of an act on the part of anybody present which the judges deem unfair, the contestant shall be given another chance.
10. The last remaining contestant shall be judged the winner.

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The response to Mike's idea was fantastic. We got invitations from all over the country from people who wanted to either see Daniel perform or challenge him to a match.

In a week, Dead-Eye made his debut in Madison Square Garden. And as long as I live, I'll never forget that opening night. Everybody of importance was there, from the Mayor on down.

Opposing Daniel that evening, among others, was a twelve-year-old kid from the Bronx, who neighbors swore hadn't been in the street for the past five years, and who his parents insisted became so hypnotized by TV they threw two or three buckets of water a week on him to revive him. Also in the match was a Staten Island housewife, jokingly called "Video Vera" by her friends and family because she not only never left her set, she also memorized complete weekly TV schedules and knew the names, ages, and birthplaces of nine out of ten television performers.

Well, the match began, and in two hours almost everyone was eliminated. The only ones remaining were Daniel, the kid from the Bronx, and Video Vera. Then at the three-hour mark Vera was dismissed for unintentionally turning her head and shouting, "Ashton Falls, Wisconsin!" when somebody in the side gallery asked her where a certain TV actor was born.

After four and a half hours, Daniel and the Bronx youngster were the only ones that remained. The boy had a steady stare and was a fine watcher, but he *was* a youngster! He got tired of a movie he was looking at and, forgetting the rules, he ran over and changed the channel. He was led off the floor, kicking and crying, by the judges.

Well, Daniel sat there alone until 2:40 the following morning. He finally blinked his eyes a little too long and was disqualified, but his record was 6 hours and 10 minutes. The crowd gave him a standing ovation. And right on the spot the Mayor declared the following seven days "Dead-Eye Daniel Week."

The next night before 55,000 people at the Polo Grounds, Daniel went 6 hours and 25 minutes to break the previous evening's record. His closest opponent, a Brooklyn grandmother, folded three hours before, when a wrestling match put her to sleep.

Then a week later at the Yankee Stadium 75,000 people saw Daniel and an 11-year-old Hoboken, N. J., girl battle for five hours. Finally the girl lost her head and turned to thumb her nose at a youngster in the crowd who had been heckling her. Daniel went over six and a half hours that night.

Pretty soon not only the rest of the country, but the rest of the world was talking about Daniel. During the next ten months, he played in almost every major country on the globe. And he not only beat everybody, but he raised the TV-watching record to eight hours!

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Well, the money rolled in and Mike found himself manager of the first undisputed TV-watching champion in the world. Did I say "undisputed"? Well, not quite.

As usual, at that time, the Soviet Union had to be different. When Mike sent letters or wires offering to bring Daniel to Moscow, sometimes he'd get an answer like "TV-watching is an idle and unproductive practice of a decadent capitalistic society." But more often than not, his messages were just ignored completely.

However, as soon as Daniel became world famous, newspapers and commentators in almost every country started praising him as "that great American TV-watcher," "that talented American televiewer," and "that world-famous TV-ite from the U. S."

He was turning out to be a one-man American prestige-lifter all over the world, and Russia, of course, didn't like this. They must have felt it was bad for them in the Psychological War.

That's why, I imagine, that famous editorial appeared on the front page of *Pravda* in October, 1959. Let me read you a translation of it. I have a copy here:

"A capitalistic fraud is masquerading as the world's champion TV-watcher. The U. S. has seemingly forgotten these facts: that a Russian, Vladimir Shiplikov, began the healthy, eye-strengthening, stamina-testing sport of 'TV-Watching' shortly after the Revolution of 1917; and that the so-called world's record held by the American has been surpassed many times in Russia.

"But since many misinformed people in the world are under the impression that the U. S. televiewer is the champion, it has become necessary for our country to prove how erroneous this assumption is.

"Comrades, Nikolai Kopkov, our most esteemed United Nations delegate, is undoubtedly our country's most proficient televiewer during his hours away from the meetings. It is only proper that a man who has been taking so much abuse for years from other members of the UN Security Council, and who has been staging a courageous battle to prevent Grubonia, a nation threatening our very existence, from being seated, should be given the honor of representing Russia in a battle against the American fraud.

"Comrades, the three most vital qualities necessary for both an outstanding UN delegate and an excellent television-watcher are extraordinary patience, will power, and stamina. Nikolai Kopkov will take these attributes into battle with him, and there is little doubt that when it is over, the banner of the People's Republics will fly above that of an effete Wall-Street-dominated civilization."

Needless to say, the editorial had quite an effect on our State Department.

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It was a direct challenge by the Soviet Union and couldn't be denied. So in a few days a representative of the Government called on Mike and told him the U. S. was throwing its official support behind Daniel in a match with Kopkov.

Well, the U. S. and Russia arranged a match for the following month in a neutral arena — a large football field on the border between East and West Berlin. It was agreed that all proceeds would go to UN relief funds.

During those next few weeks all you'd read about in the papers or see on TV would be details of the big match. Charts were drawn up on both men, similar to those you see in the papers comparing fighters' weights, heights, etc. The life histories of both men were plastered all over the place, and the betting was very heavy. Daniel was a slight favorite, because outside of the Russians, very few people in the world knew anything of Kopkov's TV-watching skills.

Well, on the night of the famous match, over 100,000 people, including ten presidents, a few kings, all kinds of prime ministers, and a few assorted dictators jammed the large field, armed with powerful binoculars. I don't know how many millions of TV sets all over the world were tuned in.

At 8 that evening a mighty roar went up as the two men walked into the middle of the well-lighted stadium. They sat down in large armchairs, each facing a 30-inch TV set. Six judges, instead of the usual three, were assigned to each man.

The whistle blew and the match was on. Daniel flicked on an English-speaking channel, the one he always watched in foreign countries. And Kopkov, who could speak five languages including English, put on a Russian speaking channel — for patriotic reasons, I suppose.

Mike and I had excellent seats, about ten yards from the two men. As I looked at Kopkov, I knew that Daniel was in for a rough night — maybe his roughest one yet. The Russian had a large, bushy moustache and dark, mean-looking eyes. He sat there the way he sat at UN meetings — his arms folded and a half sneer on his face, as if he were telling the world to go to hell.

As the hours slowly passed, Mike and I could see that Kopkov was like no other opponent Daniel had ever faced. None of them had Kopkov's intent stare and sharp unflinching eyes. You could tell he was built to go a very long way.

About 10 o'clock or so, the heckling from the crowd began. A few Kopkov fans tried to disturb Daniel by warning him of an imaginary bat that was circling over his head, and some Dead-Eye supporters hollered at the Russian that he had a hole in his trousers.

But both men ignored those childish remarks.

Then about 10:30 a few Russian sympathizers, who had read about

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Daniel's great love for food and enormous appetite, moved to the aisle at the front row of the stands and began to broil a steak on a small portable stove. They made sure the breeze blew the aroma of the meat right into Daniel's face.

I recall he twitched his nose once and sort of half-licked his lips, but he never moved his eyes from the screen. He got a good hand from the crowd.

For the next two hours it was fairly quiet, and at the six-hour mark Kopkov's steady pace really had us worried. To add to it, Daniel wasn't his usual sharp self. True, he showed no signs of faltering up to then, but from 1 o'clock on we could see that his eyes were getting a little glassy.

Kopkov all along was an iceberg in a Siberian sea. He ignored five excellent insults from the crowd (the best I had heard in quite some time) and he didn't blink an eye when an overanxious Russian partisan, aiming for Daniel, threw a head of cabbage that hit Kopkov on the head instead. But Kopkov never moved a muscle, and as the fan was ejected from the field, the Russian got a fine round of applause.

About 2:30 a beautiful blonde girl — a Daniel rooter — walked down the aisle, went up close to Kopkov and started singing love songs to him in four different languages — including Russian. Then she spoke to him for ten minutes in a throaty, sexy whisper. But it was like trying to melt the Arctic snow with a cigarette lighter. He never budged.

About 3 o'clock, everybody could tell that Daniel was weakening. A few Russian fans started singing lullabies to him, but Daniel managed to keep awake. For one dangerous minute, though, I thought he was going to doze off, but he caught himself in time. Mike and I were really worried.

The crowd was getting excited. I could see our President in a special box nearby, whispering excitedly to one of his aides. I could see the Russian Premier in another box, smiling at a few of his lieutenants.

At 5 o'clock that morning the nine-hour mark was reached — a new world's record! Dead-Eye was getting by on nothing but guts now. For the first time in his TV-watching career he had to hold his head up with both his hands to keep his eyes focused on the screen.

A couple of loyal Daniel supporters started a last-ditch barrage on Kopkov. They ridiculed every Russian they could think of, from Lenin on up. They blasted Communism, Russian women, and everything that might be sacred to Kopkov. But if he heard one word they said, you'd never guess it from the look on his face. He was as calm and undisturbed as he was when the match began. *Nothing* could upset him.

When the unheard-of ten-hour mark was reached, Daniel was holding his head up with one hand and using his other hand to keep his eyes open.

There was a nervous buzz in the stadium. Twenty minutes — maybe

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less — was all anybody gave him. Three times the judges huddled to decide whether or not his eyes left the screen. They agreed he was still hanging on.

I turned to Mike and grabbed his coat. "Mike," I whispered excitedly, "we got to do something — *anything!* He's finished! You hear me? Through!"

Mike didn't speak. He just looked straight ahead. I could almost hear the machines in his head grinding madly. If he ever picked a big fat miracle off a lazy white cloud, this was the time to do it.

Suddenly he stiffened. I could swear I heard thunder rumbling inside his skull, and for a second I thought I saw lightning shoot out of his eyes. A sort of mischievous grin appeared on his face as he slowly got up and tiptoed down the aisle. When he was about ten feet away from the contestants he stopped. Then, staring right at Kopkov, he said in a loud, clear voice, that seemed to carry to the last row of the bleachers: "Will those delegates in favor of seating Grubonia raise their hands?"

Kopkov threw his shoulders back, shouted "NYET!" and leaped from his seat. He walked a few steps, then he stopped, suddenly realizing his mistake. But it was too late. A judge's whistle blew, and Daniel's arm was raised. He was undefeated TV-watching champion of the world!

Then he fell to the ground fast asleep.

Well, Daniel got a hero's welcome when he returned to the States. That included a parade down Broadway, a confetti shower, and all the trimmings. He also received a special medal from Congress.

Nobody ever heard from Kopkov again. Some rumors had it that he was sent to Siberia; but the worst one was that he'd been sent to form an underground in Grubonia.

Daniel retired from active TV-watching competition about a year later and settled down to a life of steaks and TV in the quiet of his home.

Of course, whatever records he established in those days mean nothing now. Hell, my four-year-old grandson can do a fourteen-hour stretch in front of a television screen, barely breathing.

I get a kick out of all those people who thought TV was finished back in '87, when those rocket ships started landing on Mars, Venus, and those places. They thought everybody would be so anxious to go traveling they'd forget television. But when you stop to think of it, what are you going to do when you get there — look at scenery? Why some of our finest young TV-watchers are Mars-born . . . and they say the natives are grooming a Purple Hope.

Maybe that'll tempt Dead-Eye away from his steaks, and even lure Kopkov up above ground again. Us earthmen are pretty proud people — and you look at what Dead-Eye Daniel did for TV-watching, and you'll know we've got something to be proud *of.*

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Here Arthur Porges, who has earlier delineated for you the cockatrice, the ruum and the Devil, introduces a yet more terrifying creature:

The Grom

by ARTHUR PORGES

TAMERLANE, THE BIG TOMCAT, was seldom bored. He could lie for hours in the hot sun, chin on paws, watching with wise, slitted eyes. Human beings were always interesting, and in ten years he had learned much about their strange psychology. From his favorite vantage point on the stone window sill of the local bank, he studied the world about him. Sometimes his eyes closed briefly, but his perceptive ears remained alert, listening to all the varied, significant sounds that made up the pulse of Main Street.

But sophisticated as he was about mere humans and their odd habits, Tamerlane never failed to thrill at the sight of a grom.

The one coming down the street at this moment was unusually large, almost the size of a man. Squat, insolent, capricious in its movements, the smoky grom stalked along the sun-drenched sidewalk like a mad emperor abroad among his subjects.

Tamerlane stared with green, unwinking eyes, his tail tip lashing. A big grom like this one was bound to produce excitement somewhere in its course. The cat understood groms even better than humans. He had discovered early that people were completely unaware of a grom's presence. At first he had thought the humans merely indifferent, as some were to cats, but Tamerlane learned by experience. He would have understood groms sooner if they hadn't been scarce for so long. In this little town it was only during the last two or three years that groms had appeared in substantial numbers. The presence of the large, aggressive kind instead of the small, rather lackadaisical ones was a more recent phenomenon. Tamerlane would no longer bother with little ones. He was too old and sybaritic to leave his comfortable sill for doubtful diversions.

But this one was a giant of its kind, and right now seemed obviously bound for some definite location. And that meant almost certain excitement for an unobtrusive observer. A hoarse purr vibrated Tamerlane's throat.

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Then a glint of subtle, feline amusement appeared in his vertical pupils. The grom had spotted the ladder in front of the hardware store. Few groms could resist a ladder leaning across the sidewalk against the wall of a building. Tamerlane vaguely believed that ladders were a sort of catnip for groms, at least in such a position. When they were placed otherwise, groms ignored them.

This one leaped joyously at the sight of it, reddish spots flecking the dusky bulk. Now the grom bounded forward, slipped under, and clinging to the inner side, swung exuberantly from the tenth rung. Like a swirl of oily fog it performed insane gymnastics over, under, and about the weather-beaten ladder. Ah! Tamerlane stiffened suddenly, his tail motionless. Here came a man, tall, self-assured, apparently certain of his place in the universe. Would he go through? The grom could reach him most readily if he did. But if the man shied away, going wide, as so many did, the grom might not bother with him.

Yes, he was going under, all right. He had glanced up to see if there were anyone on top, and finding the ladder unoccupied, went through, a sort of defiant cock to his head. Tamerlane stood up, his neck out-thrust. This part invariably fascinated him all the more because he couldn't quite understand either the grom's motives or its subtle technique. No matter how often it happened, the old cat seemed unable to observe clearly just what — there!

As the man passed under the ladder, the grom dropped squarely to his shoulders, and in a single lightning motion jammed one cloudy paw into the victim's head. For perhaps a tenth of a second Tamerlane saw the man's skull become murkily transparent as the grom made little patting strokes in the tender brain tissue.

At the same time, the excited cat could see mental images stirred into being by the subtle strokes. There was the kindly, placid face of a middle-aged woman, to begin with. But almost immediately it was replaced by a pretty, empty younger one, with provocative eyes. When the older woman's face re-formed a moment later, it had crumpled into a loathsome hag-visage, full of mawkish possessiveness. The whole scene was over almost instantly.

As on every other occasion, the cat tensed at the grom's attack, expecting to see the man resent this liberty taken with his person. Then he sank back, relaxed again. The same old story: the man strode along, blithely unconscious of the grom — now back on the ladder — and its insolence. Indeed, he seemed a little proud of himself for some reason beyond Tamerlane's comprehension. It was hard to accept such indifference on the part of so arrogant a species. Encounters like this were responsible for Tamer-

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lane's conviction that humans could not perceive groms. He knew, however, that the man would react to this tampering later, and in no pleasant fashion. His kind never escaped unscathed from such a meeting. A huge grom like this one had enormous power and used it ruthlessly when so inclined.

But now, like someone recalling a more urgent errand, the grom reluctantly left the ladder and proceeded down the street again, capering and bowing from side to side. Ears flattened, Tamerlane jumped lithely from his perch and skulked along behind, moving in calculated little streaking runs from one refuge point to another, never risking an extended advance in the open. The grom acknowledged his presence very obliquely, but ignored him otherwise. This was a trait of the species which Tamerlane approved. Like most cats, he prized aloofness, preferring to court attention when in the mood rather than submit to it at another's whim.

Going ever faster, as if fearing to be late, the grom leaped down the dusty thoroughfare with Tamerlane padding along after, his head low. Once the grom stopped dead, and the cat ran up, his back arched, purring raucously. A soft, tingling extrusion stroked his thick fur, and Tamerlane rubbed against the delicious, foggy mass. Then, with a shrill, indignant mew, he sprang high in the air, his tail a bottle-brush, as the grom mischievously stabbed one slender pseudopod into the cat's body. A passerby laughed at Tamerlane's antics, calling coaxingly, but the cat snubbed him with insulting ostentation. It was a typical grom jest, and although startled and discomfited, Tamerlane soon forgave the offender. After all, it wasn't like the nasty business that had just gone on inside a man's head in the earlier byplay under the ladder. Groms never did *that* to cats. He was purring again as the grom resumed its purposeful journey.

Finally they reached the grom's goal: an empty lot, weed-grown and littered with trash. There was a burly blue-clad man wearing a metal star that gleamed in the hammering sunlight. He was fastening steel things on the wrists of a white-faced, terrified young prisoner who stood there panting, his clothes in cobwebby disarray. All about were other men — and one woman in a bright green dress and belt of red leather — watching, their faces grim. A few of them gathered casually in a small group between the policeman and the pole with its call box. Working over his captive's wrists, the officer gave those loungers sidelong, speculative glances.

Bounding exultantly, the grom raced from one person to another, pawing at their shoulders, calling into their ears, rubbing shapeless fingers over their eyes. Tamerlane could see the pictures it invoked. A big grom like this one made visions easily — they were strange, dark, incomprehensible images that stirred humans to blind fury. Almost they dredged anger up from the blood itself. Tamerlane could not always understand a

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grom's tableau. This one, for example, showed the plump, frightened youth in a gloomy cellar, an unpleasant place of dirt and cobwebs. He was stooping over a little girl whose face was horribly bruised. Her skimpy dress was in shreds. Only the man didn't look quite the same as now; instead his expression was intense, his loose mouth moist. Tamerlane wasn't sure it was the same person until the grom sharpened the scene's focus, flooding it with a hot, reddish light. And then, inexplicably, the man's face lost its human look altogether, becoming a drooling mask, with great canines and a beast's snout. At the same time, the girl was no longer a grubby child, but a small angel with a sweet, innocent smile and hair of shining gold. Tamerlane's ears shrank against his narrow skull as a feral growl broke from the thickening crowd.

Furious, the policeman swung his captive behind him. His great ruddy face dripped perspiration as he harangued the sullen gathering. Suddenly he blew a piercing blast upon a whistle. This act seemed to galvanize the grom. For some moments it raged about the officer in grotesque, silent expostulation; but although the policeman cursed his prisoner continuously in a low, bitter voice, he held his ground against the aroused townspeople. The grom left him, finally, dashing from one person to the next, raving, gesticulating, and beating out a mad rhythm with its mushy paws.

There! A seething tirade in the ear of a blocky, unshaven man, and the policeman was swept aside. He blew another urgent blast upon his whistle; then somebody slapped it from his fingers. Several men seized the cowering youth, and the woman removed her belt of scarlet leather. Gobbling sounds sprayed from her over-red mouth, and the grom danced approval. Her green dress, unconfined, billowed sack-like about her dumpy figure. A man took the belt, nodding sardonic agreement. Tamerlane padded closer.

The mob converged upon the prisoner, who dropped to his knees, whimpering. A taurine bellow came from the outraged officer as they whipped the red belt about the boy's flabby neck. His handcuffed wrists were tied to one thigh with shoelaces eagerly provided by a skinny urchin who seated himself upon the curb for that purpose. An elderly man, lips pursed in disapproval, grabbed the youngster's shoulder and turned him away, pointing down the street. The boy tore free, edging nearer to the noosed youth.

They hustled the victim to a sycamore that stood just inside a shabby picket fence. The policeman made a last desperate effort to reach the call box, but three husky men intervened, arguing half apologetically. He drew the heavy revolver from its holster, but the mob jeered, daring him to fire. And the grom, in a fantastic dido, elongated itself to a smoky wisp, slid through the gun's barrel, and emerged from the breech to reform, fuzzily

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triumphant. Tamerlane glowed with appreciation. Never had he seen a more puckishly delightful grom.

The crowd had their victim under the sycamore now, but the belt was too short. While they discussed it loudly, the woman of the house came out, shrilling threats. They paid no attention to her, and she went back in. Tamerlane sprang to the top of the gate. He could see the woman standing in her hallway, shouting into a telephone.

A man removed his belt and, to a mutter of approbation, held his faded army pants up with one hand. The two belts were joined, and they had just flung one end over a branch when a squad car rolled up to disgorge six men in blue. They charged into the snarling mob, clubs swinging. Tamerlane crouched, ready to drop over the gate, but still entranced by the grom, who stormed with redoubled energy among the wavering humans. Then a policeman's club bloodied the leader's scalp, and the crowd retreated, splitting into smaller units, which shouted taunts but slowly gave way. The trembling youth, surrounded by police, was unceremoniously bundled into the car, and with its departure, the groups broke up, leaving the grom disconsolate.

Utterly dispirited now, the red spots fading out on its grayish surface, it funeral-marched down the street. Tamerlane hesitated. It seemed doubtful that anything of real interest would result from his accompanying the disgruntled grom farther.

He thought wistfully of the stone sill, aware too of growing hunger. Before long Dinah, a neurotic black dog vaguely spaniel in appearance, would be fed by her indulgent mistress. Tamerlane, according to plan, would permit himself to be ignominiously pursued instead of annihilating the yapping creature. After sharply reprimanding her dog, the owner, by way of apology to Tamerlane, would present him with a huge pile of dainties. Once a week, at least, it was worth trying. Besides, the tender pads of his paws were sore from the heated pavement. Tamerlane turned towards town.

But suddenly the grom was alert once more, moving with eager, springy strides. A renewed purpose manifested itself plainly in the accelerated motion. Tamerlane slunk along, forgetting his throbbing paws. So intent was the grom that it even left a tall, tempting ladder with only a single flurry of acrobatics upon the twelfth rung. Soon they reached a point by the railroad tracks just out of town. There a freight train hundreds of feet long was groaning up a difficult grade.

Tamerlane stopped, puzzled, the irritating tang of oil in his sensitive nostrils. The grom was leaping, whirling, gloating alongside an ancient wooden boxcar. The cat felt baffled. He knew a great deal about groms, but this was hardly routine behavior. A fresh excitement bristled his

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tawny fur — the prospect of something really novel in grom strategy.

Why was it following this particular boxcar? Tamerlane's eye-slits rounded to silent question marks. He sniffed the air. Was there something familiar in addition to the pungent scent of magnolias? The only response to this mental query was the impersonal chuckle of a valve, the almost somniferous click of wheels over rail joints.

Then, as the long freight slowed to a crawl at the peak of the grade, a disheveled, dusty figure dropped from the boxcar. Tamerlane's tail tip came alive. One of those — and a stranger in town! Recalling certain affairs of the past in which big groms were involved, he began dimly to understand.

The grom was circling about the weary-looking person, so lean and ragged, yet rhythmically loose in his slouching gait. Tamerlane crept closer, every hair erect, as the grom caracoled in anticipation. The unkempt, exhausted human saw the cat. Full, purple-red lips parted, and white teeth flashed in the black face. It was an appealing, warm grin.

"H'yuh, Kitty!" he said in a deep, buzzing voice. "Comin' t' town, Mistah Cat? Less go then, Man — I craves eats."

Eagerly, Tamerlane fell in behind the other two.

He knew that the grom would not be frustrated again.

Coming Next

Our next issue (on the stands in early November) will feature a striking long novelet by Robert Abernathy, *The Fishers*, a dramatic psychological analysis of the reactions of a group of space-travelers under alien mental control. Unusually interesting discoveries from the past include an almost unknown story by Saki, *The Seventh Pullet*, and a charming eighteenth-century cat-fantasy translated from the French by R. Bretnor. In new stories, Philip José Farmer invents a fresh school of psychiatry in *Totem and Taboo*, William Morrison discloses an unexpected truth about dragons in *The Ardent Soul*, and Philip K. Dick creates one of the most purely chilling of science fiction's rare terror-concepts in *The Father-Thing*.

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In which a Southern California newspaperman takes the theme of future religious tyranny, adds a new twist on the limitations and consequences of time travel, and produces a fresh and lively melodrama.

Lease on Life

by LEE GRIMES

IF I DID not know as a certainty that my own sanctuary would remain undetected, I would not risk writing this account. My reason for breaking silence is my belief that your group faces destruction if it pursues its apparent course, but, given my warning, has a chance for ultimate success. You boldly proclaim the Brotherhood a conspiracy and Hugh Casselton a fraud. True! But today it is fatal to speak the truth.

For a time, for a known interval of time much longer than you would like, all open opposition to Hugh Casselton is doomed to failure. Your organization must change its strategy to survive. You must base your plans upon the fixed and absolute necessity of long and wearisome waiting.

The Brotherhood of Life Everlasting cannot be overthrown for at least fifty-eight years. Hugh Casselton cannot be killed. I tried twice myself to kill him, and I have proof that he cannot, as yet, be killed.

Forty-two years ago I, John Raymond Baxter, became the first man to travel through time.

Immediately upon my return from my second and last trip through time I tried to kill Hugh Casselton. I have not in all these years overcome my chagrin at having attempted anything so foolish, not only once but again.

"You are a fool, Baxter," Casselton said to me the second time. He was not much annoyed, merely contemptuous. His very indifference caused me to use my brain, to reach at last the conclusion that you too must accept.

I must start at the beginning. Now that science is shackled with dogma, I must assume that you are not familiar with the principles of time travel.

Old Bishop Berkeley pointed the way long ago. He wrote that material objects exist only through being perceived by the mind. If this was true of sensed data, why not of space-time relationships themselves?

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I take sole credit for that flight of imagination. Yet it took Hugh Casselton as well as our common mentor, Professor Durward, to make a reality of the dream.

"A pretty concept, John," Doc Durward told me. "Now formulate it."

Casselton snickered. We were sharing coffee, cigars, and ideas in Durward's library. Casselton and I, both young physics instructors working on our doctorates, spent as much time there as Doc would allow. Already an ascetic, Casselton did not smoke, but he still permitted himself coffee. He endured tobacco fumes in order to listen to Doc, and he endured my presence because I was the playful puppy dog who cajoled Doc into his best moods. The statue of Professor Durward labeled "Teacher of the Guardian" that now stands at the entrance to the Hall of Divine Wisdom makes him appear as cold and imperious as his pupil, but in reality he had great personal warmth and the knack of striking sparks of brilliance from our minds.

"Poor John!" Casselton said. "You might as well ask him to formulate the physics of *Through the Looking Glass.*"

"But Hugh, that can be done," Doc said. "You forget that Lewis Carroll was a logician. Even his whimsy was logical."

"Indeed?" said Casselton. "If John can formulate it, I can make it work."

"And if you can put wheels on a time buggy," I said, "I'll ride in it."

Doc and I laughed, but the idea had taken root. In the end Durward had to formulate the mathematics. Then Casselton was as good as the word he had given so contemptuously.

Those of you who hate Hugh Casselton must try to be honest. He has genius. If an unsuspected relationship exists between two facts, and if he is looking for that relationship, he will find it. By the 1980's the electrochemical nature of the mind was well understood. Meanwhile developments in physics had given us toy forerunners of today's field reaction vehicles. By combining Durward's math with field physics and psychological physics, Casselton was able to build the time cage.

"Beautiful," Durward whispered when we set it up.

"It will work," Casselton replied coolly.

He checked the helmet Durward would wear. One mind had to be both lever and anchor, and that was Doc's function. Next Casselton checked the cables from the helmet to the power pack and to the cage. The latter was a skeleton of vertical tubes, spaced two feet apart around a circular base, and supporting the activating mechanism. The whole device was just tall enough for a man to stand inside. Finally he checked the cut-off timer. Since the mental effort to send me into the future would throw Doc into a trance, the timer was set to cut off power at the proper

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moment. Doc and I would be linked by an elastic, immaterial bond that would snap me back to "base time" when the field collapsed.

"It's set for one hundred years ahead," Casselton said. "Five minutes to get there, ten minutes to make observations, and five minutes to get back." He gave me a speculative look, much as if I were some lower organism about to be plunged into a test tube.

"I'm ready," I answered. Notebook and pencil were in my pocket, field glasses and camera hanging from straps around my neck.

"Any famous words for the occasion, John?" Doc asked with a smile.

"I'm thinking of the headlines. 'Daring Young Physics Instructor Brings Tidings from Next Century. Says Berkeley Knew His Onions.' " Actually, something was bothering me, but the thought failed to take form. I persuaded myself that I was worried about how the experiment would affect Doc, who I knew had a weak heart.

"Well, good luck," Doc said.

I stepped into the skeleton cylinder that would delineate the trans-time field. I saw Doc check the timer and put on the helmet. As he lifted his finger to the switch I was wondering if I would find the air radio-active from some new and vaster war.

I was plunged into nothingness. Not black or white or any color in between. There was no sound or smell, taste or feeling. It was what I had expected, for with my time sense in suspension my other senses would not function. Nevertheless it was terrifying, for the imagination cannot anticipate the absence of all sensation, and my very thoughts seemed to trickle off into emptiness.

I tried to concentrate on the scene I had just left. We had parked our car on a coastal stretch of highway a few miles from the city and climbed a hill, descending far enough on the reverse slope so that our activities would be concealed. We had erected the time cage on the flat surface of a large rock. Around us had been sandy soil, nondescript brush, and outcroppings of stone, a scene of no importance to man and one we thought unlikely to deserve his attention in the future. It was as drab a scene as I have known, but I clung to the memory as if my sanity were at stake.

Sensation returned so abruptly that I was blinded and deafened in all of my senses. Nerve ends all over my body screamed from the mere touch of air upon them. I staggered, reaching for the metal tubes that were no longer around me, and stumbled off the rock into a patch of brush. My eyes were shut tight by reflex. I opened them slowly.

Durward and Casselton were not there. Otherwise the scene was the same, but their absence meant I had become the first man to move through time.

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With my heart beginning to pound as elation filled me, I scrambled up to the crest of the hill. And I received a shock.

We had reasoned that in a hundred years highways would be little used, but cars still sped along the road below me. A quarter of a mile away the waves of the ocean broke as they had always broken against the rocky shoreline. The city in the distance showed no obvious change.

Baffled and disturbed, I looked at my watch. The time jump was supposed to have taken five minutes, my climb up the hill another minute or so. Yet my watch showed that hardly a minute had passed.

I jerked my field glasses to my eyes for a closer study of the road.

"Ah!" I sighed out loud.

Where the dividing strip between lanes of the highway had been covered only with weeds, there was now evenly cut grass, and shrubs several feet high. I had moved in time, after all. But surely the cars would have changed more in a hundred years! And where were the multitudes of field reaction vehicles we had expected?

There below me on the highway was a 1982 Turbocar, the make I owned myself. No such cars would be in use after a hundred years.

Yet I was sure there was no flaw in our mathematics.

I climbed slowly down from the ridge line and took my position within the field on the rock. I kept my eye on my watch, and my senses dissolved at precisely the appointed instant.

This time when I recovered from the shock of renewed awareness I saw Durward sitting up, shaking his head to come out of his daze. I stepped through a gap in the cage and went over to remove his helmet. Casselton watched without speaking and without attempting to help.

Doc peered up and clutched my arm.

"Tell me, boy, tell me."

"It works," I said hesitantly.

"Tell me, John, what did you see?"

"In a minute. I'm a bit confused." I squatted down and drew a circle in the dust with my finger. I remembered that I had taken no pictures. It didn't matter.

"Did something go wrong?" Casselton asked. His voice was harsh, as if blaming me for any mishap.

"Oh, I've been to the future all right, but only a few years ahead." I told them how I knew.

Casselton sat for a moment with one hand over his eyes. It was the same pose known in these latter days as "The Guardian Weighing Virtue." Then he walked over to the cage to check the controls. Finally he came to us and picked up the helmet, reversing the setting on the cut-off timer.

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"We were right, up to a point, but we didn't follow through," he said. "I want to check an idea. Send me back one hundred years and leave me there for an hour."

"Doc can't take any more of this now," I protested.

After a moment's silence Casselton grinned.

"It will work even better with you wearing the helmet, John," he said.

Without giving me any chance to object, he turned and entered the cage. I slowly pulled the helmet over my head, looked at Doc for his nod of assent, and moved the switch.

The next thing I knew I was shaking my head to clear it. Casselton was standing in front of me.

"What was the date of your birth, John?" he asked.

"April 12, 1960."

He grinned and handed me a newspaper he had held folded in his hand. The date was April 12, 1960.

"It went just as I expected," he said. "I climbed down to the highway, hitchhiked into the city to pick up a newspaper, and hitchhiked back."

"What are you getting at?" Durward asked testily.

"We overlooked one of the implications of our premises."

Doc Durward snorted. He liked a straight answer. But I had seen what Casselton was driving at.

"Doc!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," said Casselton. "We knew that time is a function of the mind. But the time of our minds alone, the minds of just the three of us, is fragmentary. The whole fabric of time is determined by the continuing total of minds."

"Obvious," snapped Doc.

"But one thing was not obvious. The extent of John's trip was determined by your mind alone. No amount of power would carry him further than the limit of your mind's perception. And when John powered me backward in time, naturally my journey stopped at his limit, the date of his birth."

I stared sadly at nothing.

"So . . ." Doc whispered. He looked at me. "You traveled to the date of my death. It wasn't far off."

"Cars these days are built to last," I said without much conviction.

"My heart, I suppose," said Doc. He took a deep breath and straightened up. "That is unimportant," he said firmly. "We have traveled in time. We must try once more. Hugh, you will wear the helmet this time."

I went to the cage and watched while Casselton changed the settings on our equipment. He grinned as he pulled the switch.

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This time I took my change to the status of a disembodied mind calmly enough. A fleeting thought came to me, the idea that by letting my mind lie passive I would learn some unguessed secret, but I chose to wonder why Casselton had grinned. I would have thought him the type to seize upon a trip through time as a chance to learn secrets that could give him power.

Abruptly the sense of touch returned. But I couldn't see or hear! Had the longer trip through time damaged my senses?

Trembling, I knelt to touch the rock on which the cage had been erected. I felt my way off it and bumped my head against something as hard as steel. Puzzled, I stood up cautiously and reached as high as I could. The hard surface continued above my fingertips.

On all sides of the rock it was the same. I was walled in.

Someone must have anticipated my arrival in the future.

"Help!" I yelled. I pounded on the wall with both fists.

And then I heard a noise, a murmuring as of a multitude of muted voices. Almost immediately a deep voice resounded from above me.

"Who summons the Brotherhood?"

"Hey!" I called. "Open up!"

"Name thyself," demanded the voice sternly.

"John Raymond Baxter!" I shouted.

"It is the secret name. The Guardian will be informed."

All noise disappeared, even the murmuring I had heard, and there was no answer to my further demands to be freed. More angry than worried, I sat on the rock to wait.

A slit opened in the wall and spread wide. I could see that I had been enclosed in a hemisphere some fifteen feet high. One segment of the shell was sliding into a recess to make a doorway. I scurried through the sunlit opening, and stopped.

Even you who have become all too familiar with the Brotherhood of Life Everlasting cannot appreciate what I found. The growth and power of the Brotherhood in your present day is nothing to what is yet to come.

All around me the once barren hills were lined with tiers of benches in an open-air amphitheater. My rock, my one link with the past, and the shell around it stood on the shelf of a pyramid from which steps led down past an altar and farther down to a marble arena bounded by the lowest tier of benches. There were thousands of shouting, cheering men and women on the benches, the men wearing robes of pale blue and the women pale red. The steps leading up to me were lined with men in white robes whose arms were stretched out to me.

One man in priestly robes stood alone at the altar. He turned from me and raised a staff that glittered in the sun. Gradually the tumult died.

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"You have witnessed the miracle," the priest chanted. Unseen loudspeakers carried his voice to the thousands. "The Companion has returned to life, even as the Guardian promised. Now treasure the secret name of the Companion as one of the mysteries of our Brotherhood. We go, for the Guardian awaits."

The priest turned and mounted the steps. Just below my platform two escorts joined him. As they came to my side it struck me first that all three were completely bald and then that the latter two looked like thugs, huge men with hard faces.

"Be received into the loving hands of the Brotherhood," said the priest.

My arms were seized tightly by the escorts. Before I could protest I found myself rising into the air. The whole wide lip of the pyramid was a vehicle for the four of us.

Here was the field reaction vehicle foreseen in the time I had left behind, but I had no questions about it now.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"The Guardian will explain."

I shrugged and looked about me. Down below, on the highway side of the hill, the dual road was still there. It was empty except in the distance, where some slowly moving object that might have been a horse-drawn cart could be made out. The hills outside the amphitheater had been converted from a wasteland into a park.

We flew about a mile to a giant dome overlooking the sea. Lesser domes were scattered around it, and as we passed over some of them the air in front of us flickered briefly with a questioning radiance. A port opened half way up the large dome as we arrived, and we floated to a stop on entering.

I was hustled along a corridor to a wide circle of metal that rose through openings in several floors until we reached the topmost level of the dome. The air glowed red around us until the priest touched his staff to the floor. When the glow disappeared I found myself looking across a room toward a man sitting behind a semicircular desk. I noticed that the wall seemed to be one uninterrupted window, although the dome had been opaque from outside.

"Come forward, Companion," said the man behind the desk. "Brothers, you will wait in the Haven of Faith."

As calmly as I could, I walked to the desk. The man's eyes were upon me, unwinking, all the way. He was lean and bald, completely bald, with thick gray eyebrows. He was grinning.

"It was good of you not to disappoint me, John," he said. I could not mistake his grin.

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"Casselton!" I whispered.

"But of course you had no choice," he continued. "Events cannot be changed. Yes, I am Hugh Casselton, long called the Guardian, and my devoted followers know of you as the Companion of my early days, a myth you would find strangely distorted."

All of this puzzled me, but there was one question I had to have answered before any other.

"What is the date?" I leaned forward eagerly with my hands on his desk.

"September 5, the year 2085 . . ."

"One hundred years!"

". . . your time," he continued, as if I had not interrupted. He did not explain, but you will recognize his reference to the calendar change that you have seen proposed, the thirteen-month year ending with the Day of the Guardian.

"You are one hundred and twenty-five years old!" I said. "Tell me, am I . . ."

"You must be denied the pleasure of meeting yourself," Casselton said sourly. "You disappeared many years ago."

For some reason he frowned. His voice grew severe.

"Yes, Companion John, you missed your chance. Everywhere my followers wage war upon vanity, scientists and artists alike bow to my dictate that only the righteous is good, and politicians scramble for my favor. But you rejected me."

Knowing nothing of what he meant, I stood silent.

"Look!" he commanded. His finger pointed to the wall, which grew translucent and then cleared into a view of the amphitheater I had left. A priest at the altar was leading an antiphonal chant, with the crowd singing the responses.

"What is the goal?"

"Life everlasting."

"What is the path?"

"The path of righteousness."

"What lights the path?"

"The light of wisdom."

"What teaches wisdom?"

"The word of the Guardian."

"O great Universal Mind . . ." the priest began in a prayer. Casselton cut him off to shift the view on the wall screen from one scene to another.

I saw the blackened timbers of a theater, burned by the Brotherhood as a "seat of vanity," and the wreckage of a library destroyed as a "seat of discord." Casselton's voice crackled in my ear as he showed me a line of

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robed women waiting to buy "consecrated food" sold only by the Brotherhood, shops displaying "garments of virtue," also sold only by the Brotherhood, and "homes of sobriety" built and occupied by the Brotherhood.

"But why?" I demanded. "Why do they follow you?"

"To gain immortality. The Brothers still die, for they have not perfected themselves by my word, but I live on. Many fools have tried to slay the Guardian, but I live on. Now my enemies will despair, for today I gave my followers a resurrection. That is what they thought when they saw you come from a shell that had been empty, Companion John. A resurrection!"

"But you know better," I protested.

He laughed. Then a voice came from some unidentifiable source.

"Your Wisdom, the deacon general with an urgent message."

"Proceed."

"Your Wisdom, a body of militia is attacking the Temple."

Casselton worked his controls until the wall showed the hills near his dome. No men were in sight, but there were flashes of radiance, and trees burst into flame or rocks were shivered where the flashes struck. Suddenly the view shifted skyward. Sparkling golden letters shimmered in the air.

"GIVE US THE MAN FROM TIME!"

I whirled toward Casselton.

"They know!" His voice grated from the depths of his throat. "Deacons of the guard, attend me!"

Immediately the burly escorts were at my side.

"Return the Companion to the Vessel of Life," Casselton ordered, forcing calmness into his tone. "Inform the Brothers that he has brought great tidings, which I will convey to them."

The firm grip on my arms was not released until I was back in the darkness of the shell over my rock. My mind kept busy, not so much with concern over my predicament as with an attempt to guess what was happening. When the time field plucked me into the sensory vacuum, I was beginning to understand.

Someone besides Casselton had known the date I would arrive from the past. Some underground group biding its time for the moment of surprise. Why the group had asked for me, I could not guess.

It was clear that I had gone forward to a world of fanaticism and violence. I had seen glimpses of a society in the grip of a demagogue, a fraud, perhaps a madman. Casselton was bending the world to his will, and it was a sorry world.

I could save the world much grief by killing Casselton.

My senses returned and I was in the time cage, facing Casselton as he shook his head to speed his own returning awareness. There was a stone

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the size of my fist on the ground between us. I could easily crush his skull with it.

I almost leaped forward in my haste to snatch up the stone. I tripped and fell, hit my own head on the stone, and was unconscious.

Perhaps you will say that this should not count as an attempt at murder or as evidence that it is now impossible to kill Hugh Casselton. I did not so regard it myself at the time. Later I knew better.

When I recovered consciousness I was in a hospital. Doc Durward and Casselton were soon admitted to my bedside.

"Are you all right, John?" Doc asked.

"How far did you go?" asked Casselton.

"I'm all right. One hundred years to the day."

I knew I should have kept silent when I saw Casselton's lips widen in a grin. His face reddened and a vein throbbed in his temple with excitement. He grabbed my shoulder and shook me.

"What did you learn?"

"I won't tell you."

I was furious or I would have shrunk back under his look of hatred.

"Hugh!" Doc protested. "John has been hurt."

So they left me.

A few days later I was released from the hospital. I went immediately to a pawn shop and bought an old gun and some ammunition. Then I went to Doc's study, to which he had long ago given me the key.

A dim suspicion of Casselton's invulnerability had already come to me. I was determined that if he lived he would have no chance to travel through time himself to learn of the conspiracy that had surprised the Casselton of the future.

The time cage lay disassembled in a closet. I took a poker from Doc's fireplace and shattered the delicate electronic components. I bent the long tubes, ripped wire mesh, and fed the wreckage to a log fire in the fireplace. While it was blazing I rifled Doc's desk until I found his notes on the theory and mathematics of time travel. They went up in flames while the remnants of the time cage disappeared in ashes and molten metal.

Of course it was senseless of me. The fact that the Casselton of the future was surprised at the conspiracy was proof that he had not traveled through time himself. Indeed, if I had not destroyed the time cage, Casselton would soon have found some pretext for doing so. He would never have allowed someone else to gain the advantage he had won by anchoring my trip.

Nevertheless I busied myself like a frenzied idiot until the campus bell tower chimed the hour, warning me it was time to be away. I hastened to Casselton's quarters. He was not there, so I started to search the campus

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for him. Finally, when I paused after dusk for a sandwich, I heard someone in the cafe remark that there was "another nut session going on at Heinie's, with that crackpot Casselton going strong."

Heinie's was a second-rate tap room patronized by the misfits and malcontents to be found on any campus, those whose sole common bond was their failure to fit into any of the accepted groups. Fancying themselves neglected geniuses, they nightly remade the world into a hundred verbal mirages. Casselton, more of a genius and less of a misfit, was the lion of this assembly. I found him seated at a round table with half a dozen others.

Remember, that was 42 years ago. That night for the first time I heard many of the outrageous doctrines that have become commonplace today. Immortality was within the reach of man, but only the righteous would be granted life everlasting, and so on. Dull stuff, until Casselton said:

"I mean true immortality. No mere postponement of cellular collapse, but the immortality that only the Universal Mind can grant, immunity from death by violence. I know, for I am immortal!"

A hush fell over the room. Even the most credulous balked at his claim, but he had said it with such a ringing tone of pride, such contempt of doubters, that no one dared challenge him. No one, until I broke the silence.

"Would you care to put it to a test?" I asked softly.

For the first time the others in the room noticed me. Their breathing seemed to stop as I pulled the gun from my pocket.

"No!" someone shouted. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a man lifting a chair to throw at me. I fired a warning shot over his head. Quickly I brought my gun to bear on Casselton again. Already it was almost too late. The men who had sat spellbound at his side were rushing me. Something about his disregard of peril had made heroes of them all. I pulled the trigger, and was sick at heart, for at the last moment I saw one of the others come between my gun and Casselton.

Then the rush swept me to the floor. The last thing I saw before they beat me into unconsciousness was Casselton aloof beside the table.

The man struck by my bullet did not die, and at my trial I was judged to have been temporarily insane as the result of striking my head upon the rock, but it was necessary for me to leave the university. Meanwhile I had given Casselton the nucleus of his following. I set about the task of creating for myself an entirely new identity. I had to hide to survive.

For I had come to realize that Hugh Casselton cannot be killed until that day in the future when I complete my trip through time. He knows he is mortal, but he knows he cannot yet be caught in the lie when he claims immortality. You could sacrifice an entire city to try to get him with a fission bomb, but he would survive.

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There would be no miracles. His survival would always be simple and logical. But he would survive.

Until September 5, the year 2085.

That is because there are no paradoxes in time.

As soon as Hugh Casselton learned that the duration of a trip through time depended on the duration of the mind that served as the lever, he wanted nothing but to be that lever. From my trip he learned that he would live at least one hundred more years. Since my trip proved that he would be alive for one hundred years, any attempt to kill him before then is futile.

Is it any wonder that Hugh Casselton, in his rise to power, has taken risks other men would avoid? He has never had anything to fear.

But he will have. On that day 58 years from now, when my younger self arrives in the future. I have searched a long time for your group, for I think you are the ones destined to rise against him on that day. Even as I gave Casselton assurance of 100 years of life, I give you the date when that assurance ends.

The message in the sky that I shall see, demanding that Hugh Casselton turn over the man from time, will be planned to shake his nerve. Perhaps also it will be designed to counter his lie of having brought about a resurrection. Surely, in 58 more years, many of his followers will be ready for the final disillusionment.

If I do not give you my adopted name or tell my present trade, it is because in these intervening years I fear discovery by the Brotherhood. Because I am so cautious, my concealment will be successful.

There are no paradoxes in time, for there is a natural cause for everything.

Make your plans carefully. You have plenty of time.

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Science fiction readers need no footnotes on the brilliant career of Richard Matheson, from his classic first story, Born of Man and Woman *(F&SF, Summer, 1950) to his just-published first fantasy novel,* I AM LEGEND *(Gold Medal). And* The Test *is too true and moving a story to need any introduction beyond this: that it treats, poignantly and perceptively, a many-valued human problem to which even the advanced future will find no simple answer.*

The Test

by RICHARD MATHESON

THE NIGHT BEFORE the test, Les helped his father study in the dining room. Jim and Tommy were asleep upstairs and, in the living room, Terry was sewing, her face expressionless as the needle moved with a swiftly rhythmic piercing and drawing.

Tom Parker sat very straight, his lean, vein-ribbed hands clasped together on the table top, his pale blue eyes looking intently at his son's lips as though it might help him to understand better.

He was 80 and this was his fourth test.

"All right," Les said, reading from the sample test Doctor Trask had gotten them. "Repeat the following sequences of numbers."

"Sequence of numbers," Tom murmured, trying to assimilate the words as they came. But words were not quickly assimilated any more; they seemed to lie upon the tissues of his brain like insects on a sluggish carnivore. He said the words in his mind again — *sequence of . . . sequence of numbers* — there he had it. He looked at his son and waited.

"Well?" he said, impatiently, after a moment's silence.

"Dad, I've already given you the first one," Les told him.

"Well . . ." His father grasped for the proper words. "Kindly give me the — the . . . do me the kindness of . . ."

Les exhaled wearily. "Eight-five-eleven-six," he said.

The old lips stirred, the old machinery of Tom's mind began turning slowly.

"Eight . . . f — ive . . ." The pale eyes blinked slowly. "Elevensix," Tom finished in a breath, then straightened himself proudly.

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Yes, good, he thought — very good. They wouldn't fool him tomorrow; he'd beat their murderous law. His lips pressed together and his hands clasped tightly on the white table cloth.

"What?" he said then, refocusing his eyes as Les said something. "Speak up," he said, irritably. "Speak *up*."

"I gave you another sequence," Les said quietly. "Here, I'll read it again."

Tom leaned forward a little, ears straining.

"Nine-two-sixteen-seven-three," Les said.

Tom cleared his throat with effort. "Speak slower," he told his son. He hadn't quite gotten that. How did they expect anyone to retain such a ridiculously long string of numbers?

"What, *what?*" he asked angrily as Les read the numbers again.

"Dad, the examiner will be reading the questions faster than *I'm* reading them. You —"

"I'm quite aware of that," Tom interrupted stiffly, "Quite aware. Let me remind you . . . however, this is . . . not a test. It's study, it's for *study*. Foolish to go rushing through everything. *Foolish*. I have to learn this — this . . . this *test*," he finished, angry at his son and angry at the way desired words hid themselves from his mind.

Les shrugged and looked down at the test again. "Nine-two-sixteen-seven-three," he read slowly.

"Nine-two-six-seven —"

"Six*teen*-seven, Dad."

"I said that."

"You said six, Dad."

"Don't you suppose I know what I said!"

Les closed his eyes a moment. "All right, Dad," he said.

"Well, are you going to read it again or not?" Tom asked him sharply.

Les read the numbers off again and, as he listened to his father stumble through the sequence, he glanced into the living room at Terry.

She was sitting there, features motionless, sewing. She'd turned off the radio and he knew she could hear the old man faltering with the numbers.

All right, Les heard himself saying in his mind as if he spoke to her. All right, I know he's old and useless. Do you want me to tell him that to his face and drive a knife into his back? You know and I know that he won't pass the test. Allow me, at least, this brief hypocrisy. Tomorrow the sentence will be passed. Don't make me pass it tonight and break the old man's heart.

"That's correct, I believe," Les heard the dignified voice of his father say and he refocused his eyes on the gaunt, seamed face.

"Yes, that's right," he said, hastily.

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He felt like a traitor when a slight smile trembled at the corners of his father's mouth. I'm cheating him, he thought.

"Let's go on to something else," he heard his father say and he looked down quickly at the sheet. What would be easy for him? he thought, despising himself for thinking it.

"Well, come on, Leslie," his father said in a restrained voice. "We have no time to waste."

Tom looked at his son thumbing through the pages and his hands closed into fists. Tomorrow, his life was in the balance and his son just browsed through the test paper as if nothing important were going to happen tomorrow.

"Come on, come on," he said peevishly.

Les picked up a pencil that had string attached to it and drew a half-inch circle on a piece of blank paper. He held out the pencil to his father.

"Suspend the pencil point over the circle for three minutes," he said, suddenly afraid he'd picked the wrong question. He'd seen his father's hands trembling at meal times or fumbling with the buttons and zippers of his clothes.

Swallowing nervously, Les picked up the stop watch, started it, and nodded to his father.

Tom took a quivering breath as he leaned over the paper and tried to hold the slightly swaying pencil above the circle. Les saw him lean on his elbow, something he wouldn't be allowed to do on the test; but he said nothing.

He sat there looking at his father. Whatever color there had been was leaving the old man's face and Les could see clearly the tiny red lines of broken vessels under the skin of his cheeks. He looked at the dry skin, creased and brownish, dappled with liver spots. Eighty years old, he thought — what does a man feel when he's 80 years old?

He looked in at Terry again. For a moment, her gaze shifted and they were looking at each other, neither of them smiling or making any sign. Then Terry looked back to her sewing.

"I believe that's three minutes," Tom said in a taut voice.

Les looked down at the stop watch. "A minute and a half, Dad," he said, wondering if he should have lied again.

"Well, keep your eyes on the watch then," his father said, perturbedly, the pencil penduluming completely out of the circle. "This is supposed to be a test, not a — a — a *party*."

Les kept his eyes on the wavering pencil point, feeling a sense of utter futility at the realization that this was only pretense, that nothing they did could save his father's life.

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At least, he thought, the examinations weren't given by the sons and daughters who had voted the law into being. At least he wouldn't have to stamp the black INADEQUATE on his father's test and thus pronounce the sentence.

The pencil wavered over the circle edge again and was returned as Tom moved his arm slightly on the table, a motion that would automatically disqualify him on that question.

"That watch is slow!" Tom said in a sudden fury.

Les caught his breath and looked down at the watch. Two and a half minutes. "Three minutes," he said, pushing in the plunger.

Tom slapped down the pencil irritably. "*There*," he said. "Fool test anyway." His voice grew morose. "Don't prove a thing. Not a thing."

"You want to do some money questions, Dad?"

"Are they the next questions in the test?" Tom asked, looking over suspiciously to check for himself.

"Yes," Les lied, knowing that his father's eyes were too weak to see even though Tom always refused to admit he needed glasses. "Oh, wait a second, there's one before that," he added, thinking it would be easier for his father. "They ask you to tell time."

"That's a foolish question," Tom muttered. "What do they —"

He reached across the table irritably and picked up the watch and glanced down at its face. "Ten fifteen," he said, scornfully.

Before Les could think to stop himself, he said, "But it's 11:15, Dad."

His father looked, for a moment, as though his face had been slapped. Then he picked up the watch again and stared down at it, lips twitching, and Les had the horrible premonition that Tom was going to insist it really was 10:15.

"Well, that's what I meant," Tom said abruptly. "Slipped out wrong. Course it's 11:15, any fool can see that. Eleven fifteen. Watch is no good. Numbers too close. Ought to throw it away. Now —"

Tom reached into his vest pocket and pulled out his own gold watch. "Here's a *watch*," he said, proudly. "Been telling perfect time for . . . sixty years! That's a watch. Not like *this*."

He tossed Les's watch down contemptuously and it flipped over on its face and the crystal broke.

"Look at that," Tom said quickly, to cover the jolting of embarassment. "Watch can't take anything."

He avoided Les's eyes by looking down at his own watch. His mouth tightened as he opened the back and looked at Mary's picture; Mary when she was in her thirties, golden-haired and lovely.

Thank God, she didn't have to take these tests, he thought — at least

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she was spared that. Tom had never thought he could believe that Mary's accidental death at 57 was fortunate, but that was before the tests.

He closed the watch and put it away.

"You just leave that watch with me, tonight," he said grumpily. "I'll see you get a decent . . . uh, *crystal* tomorrow."

"That's all right, Dad. It's just an old watch."

"That's *all* right," Tom said. "That's all right. You just leave it with me. I'll get you a decent . . . crystal. Get you one that won't break, one that won't break. You just leave it with me."

Tom did the money questions then, questions like *How many quarters in a five dollar bill?* and *If I took 36 cents from your dollar, how much change would you have left?*

They were written questions and Les sat there timing his father. It was quiet in the house, warm. Everything seemed very normal and ordinary with the two of them sitting there and Terry sewing in the living room.

That was the horror.

Life went on as usual. No one spoke of dying. The government sent out letters and the tests were given and those who failed were requested to appear at the government center for their injections. The law operated, the death rate was steady, the population problem was contained — all officially, impersonally, without a cry or a sensation.

But it was still loved people who were being killed.

"Never mind hanging over that watch," his father said. "I can do these questions without you . . . hanging over that watch."

"Dad, the examiners will be looking at their watches."

"The examiners are the examiners," Tom snapped. "You're not an examiner."

"Dad, I'm trying to help y —"

"Well, help me then, *help* me. Don't sit there hanging over that watch."

"This is your test, Dad, not mine," Les started, a flush of anger creeping up his cheeks. "If —"

"My test, yes, my test!" his father suddenly raged. "You all saw to that, didn't you? All saw to it that — that —"

Words failed again, angry thoughts piling up in his brain.

"You don't have to yell, Dad."

"I'm not yelling!"

"Dad, the boys are sleeping!" Terry suddenly broke in.

"I don't care if —!" Tom broke off suddenly and leaned back in the chair, the pencil falling unnoticed from his fingers and rolling across the table cloth. He sat shivering, his thin chest rising and falling in jerks, his hands twitching uncontrollably on his lap.

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"Do you want to go on, Dad?" Les asked, restraining his nervous anger.

"I don't ask much," Tom mumbled to himself. "Don't ask much in life."

"Dad, shall we go *on?*"

His father stiffened. "*If you can spare the time,*" he said with slow, indignant pride. "*If you can spare the time.*"

Les looked at the test paper, his fingers gripping the stapled sheets rigidly. Psychological questions? No, he couldn't ask them. How did you ask your 80-year-old father his views on sex? — your flint-surfaced father to whom the most innocuous remark was "obscene."

"Well?" his father asked in a rising voice.

"There doesn't seem to be anymore," Les said. "We've been at it almost four hours now."

"What about all those pages you just skipped?"

"Most of those are for the . . . the physical, Dad."

He saw his father's lips press together and was afraid Tom was going to say something about that again. But all his father said was, "A fine friend. Fine friend."

"Dad, you —"

Les's voice broke off. There was no point in talking about it anymore. Tom knew perfectly well that Doctor Trask couldn't make out a bill of health for this test the way he'd done for the three tests previous.

Les knew how frightened and insulted the old man was because he'd have to take off his clothes and be exposed to doctors who would probe and tap and ask offensive questions. He knew how afraid Tom was of the fact that when he re-dressed, he'd be watched from a peephole and someone would mark on a chart how well he dressed himself. He knew how it frightened his father to know that, when he ate in the government cafeteria at the midpoint of the day-long examination, eyes would be watching him again to see if he dropped a fork or a spoon or knocked over a glass of water or dribbled gravy on his shirt.

"They'll ask you to sign your name and address," Les said, wanting his father to forget about the physical and knowing how proud Tom was of his handwriting.

Pretending that he grudged it, the old man picked up the pencil and wrote. I'll fool them, he thought as the pencil moved across the page with strong, sure motions.

Mr. Thomas Parker, he wrote, *2719 Brighton Street, Blairtown, New York.*

"And the date," Les said.

The old man wrote, *January 17, 2003*, and something cold moved in the old man's vitals.

Tomorrow was the test.

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They lay beside each other, neither of them sleeping. They had barely spoken while undressing and when Les had leaned over to kiss her goodnight she'd murmured something he didn't hear.

Now he turned over on his side with a heavy sigh and faced her. In the darkness, she opened her eyes and looked over at him.

"Asleep?" she asked softly.

"No."

He said no more. He waited for her to start.

But she didn't start and, after a few moments, he said, "Well, I guess this is . . . it." He finished weakly because he didn't like the words; they sounded ridiculously melodramatic.

Terry didn't say anything right away. Then, as if thinking aloud, she said, "Do you think there's any chance that —"

Les tightened at the words because he knew what she was going to say.

"No," he said. "He'll never pass."

He heard Terry swallowing. Don't say it, he thought, pleadingly. Don't tell me I've been saying the same thing for fifteen years. I know it. I said it because I thought it was true.

Suddenly, he wished he'd signed the *Request For Removal* years before. They needed desperately to be free of Tom; for the good of their children and themselves. But how did you put that need into words without feeling like a murderer? You couldn't say: I hope the old man fails, I hope they kill him. Yet anything else you said was only a hypocritical substitute for those words because that was exactly how you felt.

Medical terms, he thought — charts about declining crops and lowered standard of living and hunger ratio and degrading health level — they'd used all those as arguments to support passage of the law. Well, they were lies — obvious, groundless lies. The law had been passed because people wanted to be left alone, because they wanted to live their own lives.

"Les, what if he passes?" Terry said.

He felt his hands tightening on the mattress.

"Les?"

"I don't know, honey," he said.

Her voice was firm in the darkness. It was a voice at the end of patience. "You have to know," it said.

He moved his head restlessly on the pillow. "Honey, don't push it," he begged. "Please."

"Les, if he passes that test it means five more years. *Five more years*, Les. Have you thought what that means?"

"Honey, he can't pass that test.'

"But, what if he does?"

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"Terry, he missed three-quarters of the questions I asked him tonight. His hearing is almost gone, his eyes are bad, his heart is weak, he has arthritis." His fist beat down hopelessly on the bed. "He won't even pass the *physical*," he said, feeling himself tighten in self-hatred for assuring her that Tom was doomed.

If only he could forget the past and take his father for what he was now — a helpless, mid-jading old man who was ruining their lives. But it was hard to forget how he'd loved and respected his father, hard to forget the hikes in the country, the fishing trips, the long talks at night and all the many things his father and he had shared together.

That was why he'd never had the strength to sign the request. It was a simple form to fill out, much simpler than waiting for the five-year tests. But it had meant signing away the life of his father, requesting the government to dispose of him like some unwanted garbage. He could never do that.

And yet, now his father was 80 and, in spite of moral upbringing, in spite of life-taught Christian principles, he and Terry were horribly afraid that old Tom might pass the test and live another five years with them — another five years of fumbling around the house, undoing instructions they gave to the boys, breaking things, wanting to help but only getting in the way and making life an agony of held-in nerves.

"You'd better sleep," Terry said to him.

He tried to but he couldn't. He lay staring at the dark ceiling and trying to find an answer but finding no answer.

The alarm went off at 6. Les didn't have to get up until 8 but he wanted to see his father off. He got out of bed and dressed quietly so he wouldn't wake up Terry.

She woke up anyway and looked up at him from her pillow. After a moment, she pushed up on one elbow and looked sleepily at him.

"I'll get up and make you some breakfast," she said.

"That's all right," Les said. "You stay in bed."

"Don't you want me to get up?"

"Don't bother, honey," he said. "I want you to rest."

She lay down again and turned away so Les wouldn't see her face. She didn't know why she began to cry soundlessly; whether it was because he didn't want her to see his father or because of the test. But she couldn't stop. All she could do was hold herself rigid until the bedroom door had closed.

Then her shoulders trembled and a sob broke the barrier she had built in herself.

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The door to his father's room was open as Les passed. He looked in and saw Tom sitting on the bed, leaning down and fastening his dark shoes. He saw the gnarled fingers shaking as they moved over the straps.

"Everything all right, Dad?" Les asked.

His father looked up in surprise. "What are you doing up this hour?" he asked.

"Thought I'd have breakfast with you," Les told him.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence. Then his father leaned over the shoes again. "That's not necessary," he heard the old man's voice telling him.

"Well, I think I'll have some breakfast anyway," he said and turned away so his father couldn't argue.

"Oh . . . *Leslie*."

Les turned.

"I trust you didn't forget to leave that watch out," his father said. "I intend to take it to the jeweler's today and have a decent . . . decent crystal put on it, one that won't break."

"Dad, it's just an old watch," Les said. "It's not worth a nickel."

His father nodded slowly, one palm wavering before him as if to ward off argument. "Never-the-less," he stated slowly, "I intend to —"

"All right, Dad, all right. I'll put it on the kitchen table."

His father broke off and looked at him blankly a moment. Then, as if it were impulse and not delayed will, he bent over his shoes again.

Les stood for a moment looking down at his father's gray hair, his gaunt, trembling fingers. Then he turned away.

The watch was still on the dining room table. Les picked it up and took it in to the kitchen table. The old man must have been reminding himself about the watch all night, he thought. Otherwise he wouldn't have managed to remember it.

He put fresh water in the coffee globe and pushed the buttons for two servings of bacon and eggs. Then he poured two glasses of orange juice and sat down at the table.

About fifteen minutes later, his father came down wearing his dark blue suit, his shoes carefully polished, his nails manicured, his hair slicked down and combed and brushed. He looked very neat and very old as he walked over to the coffee globe and looked in.

"Sit down, Dad," Les said. "I'll get it for you."

"I'm not helpless," his father said. "Stay where you are."

Les managed a smile. "I put some bacon and eggs on for us," he said.

"Not hungry," his father replied.

"You'll need a good breakfast in you, Dad."

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"Never did eat a big breakfast," his father said, stiffly, still facing the stove. "Don't believe in it. Not good for the stomach."

Les closed his eyes a moment and across his face moved an expression of hopeless despair. Why did I bother getting up? he asked himself defeatedly. All we do is argue.

No. He felt himself stiffening. No, he'd be cheerful if it killed him.

"Sleep all right, Dad?" he asked.

"Course I slept all right," his father answered. "Always sleep fine. Fine. Did you think I wouldn't because of a —"

He broke off suddenly and turned accusingly at Les. "Where's that watch?" he demanded.

Les exhaled wearily and held up the watch. His father moved jerkily across the linoleum, took it from him and looked at it a moment, his old lips pursed.

"Shoddy workmanship," he said. "Shoddy." He put it carefully in his side coat pocket. "Get you a decent crystal," he muttered. "One that won't break."

Les nodded. "That'll be swell, Dad."

The coffee was ready then and Tom poured them each a cup. Les got up and turned off the automatic griller. He didn't feel like having bacon and eggs either now.

He sat across the table from his stern-faced father and felt hot coffee trickling down his throat. It tasted terrible but he knew that nothing in the world would have tasted good to him that morning.

"What time do you have to be there, Dad?" he asked to break the silence.

"Nine o'clock," Tom said.

"You're sure you don't want me to drive you there?"

"Not at all, not at all," his father said as though he were talking patiently to an irritably insistent child. "The tube is good enough. Get me there in plenty of time."

"All right, Dad," Les said and sat there staring into his coffee. There must be something he could say, he thought, but he couldn't think of anything. Silence hung over them for long minutes while Tom drank his black coffee in slow, methodical sips.

Les licked his lips nervously, then hid the trembling of them behind his cup. Talking, he thought, talking and talking — of cars and tube conveyers and examination schedules — when all the time both of them knew that Tom might be sentenced to death that day.

He was sorry he'd gotten up. It would have been better to wake up and just find his father gone. He wished it could happen that way — *permanently*. He wished he could wake up some morning and find his father's

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room empty — the two suits gone, the dark shoes gone, the work clothes gone, the handkerchiefs, the socks, the garters, the braces, the shaving equipment — all those mute evidences of a life gone.

But it wouldn't be like that. After Tom failed the test, it would be several weeks before the letter of final appointment came and then another week or so before the appointment itself. It would be a hideously slow process of packing and disposing of and giving away of possessions, a process of meals and meals and meals together, of talking to each other, of a last dinner, of a long drive to the government center, of a ride up in a silent, humming elevator, of —

Dear God!

He found himself shivering helplessly and was afraid for a moment that he was going to cry.

Then he looked up with a shocked expression as his father stood.

"I'll be going now," Tom said.

Les's eyes fled to the wall clock. "But it's only a quarter to 7," he said, tensely. "It doesn't take that long to —"

"Like to be in plenty of time," his father said firmly. "Never like to be late."

"But my God, Dad, it only takes an hour at the most to get to the city," he said, feeling a terrible sinking in his stomach.

His father shook his head and Les knew he hadn't heard. "It's early, Dad," he said, loudly, his voice shaking a little.

"Never-the-less," his father said.

"But you haven't *eaten* anything."

"Never did eat a big breakfast," Tom started. "Not good for the —"

Les didn't hear the rest of it — the words about lifetime habit and not good for the digestion and everything else his father said. He felt waves of merciless horror breaking over him and he wanted to jump and throw his arms around the old man and tell him not to worry about the test because it didn't matter, because they loved him and would take care of him.

But he couldn't. He sat rigid with sick fright, looking up at his father. He couldn't even speak when his father turned at the kitchen door and said in a voice that was calmly dispassionate because it took every bit of strength the old man had to make it so, "I'll see you tonight, Leslie."

The door swung shut and the breeze that ruffled across Les's cheeks chilled him to the heart.

Suddenly, he jumped up with a startled grunt and rushed across the linoleum. As he pushed through the doorway he saw his father almost to the front door.

"Dad!"

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Tom stopped and looked back in surprise as Les walked across the dining room, hearing the steps counted in his mind — *one, two, three, four, five.*

He stopped before his father and forced a faltering smile to his lips.

"Good luck, Dad," he said. "I'll . . . see you tonight." He had been about to say, "I'll be rooting for you"; but he couldn't.

His father nodded once, just once, a curt nod as of one gentleman acknowledging another.

"Thank you," his father said and turned away.

When the door shut, it seemed as if, suddenly, it had become an impenetrable wall through which his father could never pass again.

Les moved to the window and watched the old man walk slowly down the path and turn left onto the sidewalk. He watched his father start up the street, then straighten himself, throw back his lean shoulders and walk erect and briskly into the gray of morning.

At first Les thought it was raining. But then he saw that the shimmering moistness wasn't on the window at all.

He couldn't go to work. He phoned in sick and stayed home. Terry got the boys off to school and, after they'd eaten breakfast, Les helped her clear away the morning dishes and put them in the washer. Terry didn't say anything about his staying home. She acted as if it were normal for him to be home on a weekday.

He spent the morning and afternoon puttering in the garage shop, starting seven different projects and losing interest in them.

Around 5, he went into the kitchen and had a can of beer while Terry made supper. He didn't say anything to her. He kept pacing around the living room, staring out the window at the overcast sky, then pacing again.

"I wonder where he is," he finally said, back in the kitchen again.

"He'll be back," she said and he stiffened a moment, thinking he heard disgust in her voice. Then he relaxed, knowing it was only his imagination.

When he dressed after taking a shower, it was five forty. The boys were home from playing and they all sat down to supper. Les noticed a place set for his father and wondered if Terry had set it there for his benefit.

He couldn't eat anything. He kept cutting the meat into smaller and smaller pieces and mashing butter into his baked potato without tasting any of it.

"What is it?" he asked as Jim spoke to him.

"Dad, if grandpa don't pass the test, he gets a month, don't he?"

Les felt his stomach muscles tightening as he stared at his older son. *gets a month, don't he?* — the last of Jim's question muttered on in his brain.

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"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"My Civics book says old people get a month to live after they don't pass their test. That's right, isn't it?"

"No, it *isn't*," Tommy broke in. "Harry Senker's grandma got her letter after only two weeks."

"How do *you* know?" Jim asked his nine-year-old brother. "Did you *see* it?"

"That's enough," Les said.

"Don't *have* t'see it!" Tommy argued, "Harry told me that —"

"That's *enough!*"

The two boys looked suddenly at their white-faced father.

"We won't talk about it," he said.

"But what —"

"*Jimmy*," Terry said, warningly.

Jimmy looked at his mother, then, after a moment, went back to his food and they all ate in silence.

The death of their grandfather means nothing to them, Les thought bitterly — nothing at all. He swallowed and tried to relax the tightness in his body. Well, why *should* it mean anything to them? he told himself; it's not their time to worry yet. Why force it on them now? They'll have it soon enough.

When the front door opened and shut at 6:10, Les stood up so quickly, he knocked over an empty glass.

"Les, *don't*," Terry said suddenly and he knew, immediately, that she was right. His father wouldn't like him to come rushing from the kitchen with questions.

He slumped down on the chair again and stared at his barely touched food, his heart throbbing. As he picked up his fork with tight fingers, he heard the old man cross the dining room rug and start up the stairs. He glanced at Terry and her throat moved.

He couldn't eat. He sat there breathing heavily, and picking at the food. Upstairs, he heard the door to his father's room close.

It was when Terry was putting the pie on the table that Les excused himself quickly and got up.

He was at the foot of the stairs when the kitchen door was pushed open. "Les," he heard her say, urgently.

He stood there silently as she came up to him.

"Isn't it better we leave him alone?" she asked.

"But, honey, I —"

"Les, if he'd passed the test, he would have come into the kitchen and told us."

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"Honey, he wouldn't know if —"

"He'd know if he passed, you know that. He told us about it the last two times. If he'd passed, he'd have —"

Her voice broke off and she shuddered at the way he was looking at her. In the heavy silence, she heard a sudden splattering of rain on the windows.

They looked at each other a long moment. Then Les said, "I'm going up."

"Les," she murmured.

"I won't say anything to upset him," he said, "I'll . . ."

A moment longer they stared at each other. Then he turned away and trudged up the steps. Terry watched him go with a bleak, hopeless look on her face.

Les stood before the closed door a minute, bracing himself. I won't upset him, he told himself; I *won't.*

He knocked softly, wondering, in that second, if he were making a mistake. Maybe he should have left the old man alone, he thought unhappily.

In the bedroom, he heard a rustling movement on the bed, then the sound of his father's feet touching the floor.

"Who is it?" he heard Tom ask.

Les caught his breath. "It's me, Dad," he said.

"What do you want?"

"May I see you?"

Silence inside. "Well . . ." he heard his father say then and his voice stopped. Les heard him get up and heard the sound of his footsteps on the floor. Then there was the sound of paper rattling and a bureau drawer being carefully shut.

Finally the door opened.

Tom was wearing his old red bathrobe over his clothes and he'd taken off his shoes and put his slippers on.

"May I come in, Dad?" Les asked quietly.

His father hesitated a moment. Then he said, "Come in," but it wasn't an invitation. It was more as if he'd said, This is your house; I can't keep you from this room.

Les was going to tell his father that he didn't want to disturb him but he couldn't. He went in and stood in the middle of the throw rug, waiting.

"Sit down," his father said and Les sat down on the upright chair that Tom hung his clothes on at night. His father waited until Les was seated and then sank down on the bed with a grunt.

For a long time they looked at each other without speaking like total strangers each waiting for the other one to speak. How did the test go? Les heard the words repeated in his mind. How did the test go, how did the test go? He couldn't speak the words. How did the —

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"I suppose you want to know what . . . happened," his father said then, controlling himself visibly.

"Yes," Les said, "I . . ." He caught himself. "Yes," he repeated and waited.

Old Tom looked down at the floor for a moment. Then, suddenly, he raised his head and looked defiantly at his son.

"*I didn't go*," he said.

Les felt as if all his strength had suddenly been sucked into the floor. He sat there, motionless, staring at his father.

"Had no intention of going," his father hurried on. "No intention of going through all that foolishness. Physical tests, m-mental tests, putting b-b-*blocks* in a board and . . . Lord knows what all! Had no intention of going."

He stopped and stared at his son with angry eyes as if he were daring Les to say he had done wrong.

But Les couldn't say anything.

A long time passed. Les swallowed and managed to summon the words. "What are you . . . going to do?"

"Never mind that, never mind," his father said, almost as if he were grateful for the question. "Don't you worry about your Dad. Your Dad knows how to take care of himself."

And suddenly Les heard the bureau drawer shutting again, the rustling of a paper bag. He almost looked around at the bureau to see if the bag were still there. His head twitched as he fought down the impulse.

"W-ell," he faltered, not realizing how stricken and lost his expression was.

"Just never mind now," his father said again, quietly, almost gently. "It's not your problem to worry about. Not your problem at all."

But it is! Les heard the words cried out in his mind. But he didn't speak them. Something in the old man stopped him; a sort of fierce strength, a taut dignity he knew he mustn't touch.

"I'd like to rest now," he heard Tom say then and he felt as if he'd been struck violently in the stomach. I'd like to rest now, to rest now — the words echoed down long tunnels of the mind as he stood. Rest now, rest now . . .

He found himself being ushered to the door where he turned and looked at his father. *Goodbye*. The word stuck in him.

Then his father smiled and said, "Good night, Leslie."

"*Dad*."

He felt the old man's hand in his own, stronger than his, more steady; calming him, reassuring him. He felt his father's left hand grip his shoulder.

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"Good night, son," his father said and, in the moment they stood close together, Les saw, over the old man's shoulder, the crumpled drugstore bag lying in the corner of the room as though it had been thrown there so as not to be seen.

Then he was standing in wordless terror in the hall, listening to the latch clicking shut and knowing that, although his father wasn't locking the door, he couldn't go into his father's room.

For a long time he stood staring at the closed door, shivering without control. Then he turned away.

Terry was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs, her face drained of color. She asked the question with her eyes as he came down to her.

"He . . . didn't go," was all he said.

She made a tiny, startled sound in her throat. "But —"

"He's been to the drugstore," Les said. "I . . . saw the bag in the corner of the room. He threw it away so I wouldn't see it but I . . . saw it."

For a moment, it seemed as if she were starting for the stairs but it was only a momentary straining of her body.

"He must have shown the druggist the letter about the test," Les said. "The . . . druggist must have given him . . . pills. Like they all do."

They stood silently in the dining room while rain drummed against the windows.

"What shall we do?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"Nothing," he murmured. His throat moved convulsively and breath shuddered through him. "*Nothing*."

Then he was walking numbly back to the kitchen and he could feel her arm tight around him as if she were trying to press her love to him because she could not speak of love.

All evening, they sat there in the kitchen. After she put the boys to bed, she came back and they sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and talking in quiet, lonely voices.

Near midnight, they left the kitchen and, just before they went upstairs, Les stopped by the dining room table and found the watch with a shiny new crystal on it. He couldn't even touch it.

They went upstairs and walked past the door of Tom's bedroom. There was no sound inside. They got undressed and got in bed together and Terry set the clock the way she set it every night. In a few hours they both managed to fall alseep.

And all night there was silence in the old man's room. And the next day, silence.

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In less than five years Chad Oliver has advanced rapidly from a persistent contributor of letters in fan departments to a highly regarded professional creator of science fiction and fantasy — all in his off-time from serious academic work in anthropology. One reason for his success has been his versatile refusal to write stories which are careful replicas of the ones he's already sold; every Oliver story is something a little different. But I don't think even the ingenious Oliver has created anything quite like this curious narrative of the inhabitants of the town which serves as background to a model railroad — a story so oddly convincing that one feels the author must, through some microcosmic miracle, have done his anthropological field research in just such a town.

Transformer

by **CHAD OLIVER**

OUR TOWN IS turned off now, all gray and lazy, so this seems like a good time to begin.

Let's not kid ourselves about it, Clyde — I know what you're thinking. I don't blame you. You're thinking there's nothing from one wall to the other that's as completely and thoroughly boring as some motherly old dame gushing about the One Hundred and One fugitives from Paradise which are to be found in Her Home Town. A real insomnia killer, that's what you're thinking. A one-bell monologue.

Suppose we get things straight, right from the start.

I may look like one of those sweet little old ladies who spend all their time in the kitchen slipping apple preserves to bleary-eyed children, but I can't help what I look like, and neither can you. I never set foot in a kitchen in my life, and of course there aren't any kids in our town — not physically, anyway. I don't say I'm the most interesting gal you ever met, Clyde, but I'll tell you for sure you never yakked with anyone like *me* before.

Now, you take our town. If you want it straight, it's the damnedest place you ever heard of. It stinks, but we can't get out. ELM POINT is the name on the station, that's what we have to call it, but it's as crazy as the rest

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of the place. There's no point in ELM POINT, and the only trees I ever saw are made out of sponge rubber.

You might stick around for a minute and listen, you see — things might get interesting.

One more thing we might as well clear up while we're at it. I can hear you thinking, with that sophisticated mind of yours: "Who's she supposed to be telling the story to? That's the trouble with all these first-person narratives." Well, Clyde, that's a dumb question, if you ask me. Do you worry about where the music comes from when Pinza sings in a lifeboat? I feel sorry for you, I really do. I'll tell you the secret: the music comes from a studio orchestra that's hidden in the worm-can just to the left of the Nazi spy. You follow me? The plain, unvarnished truth is that I get restless when the town's turned off for a long time. I can't sleep. I'm talking to myself. I'm bored stiff, and so would you be if you had to live here for your whole life. But I know you're there, Clyde, or this wouldn't be getting through to you. Don't worry about it, though.

This is strictly for kicks.

Okay, so let's have some details. I live in a town that's part of the background for a model railroad. Maybe you think that's funny, but did you ever live in a subway? I want to be absolutely clear about this — you're a little dense sometimes, Clyde. I don't mean that ELM POINT is a town that's located on a big railroad that's operated in an exemplary, model manner. No. I mean I live on a *model* railroad, a half-baked contraption that's set up in a kid's attic. The kid's name is Willy Roberts, he's thirteen years old, and we don't think he's a god that created our world. In fact, if you want my opinion, Willy is a low-grade moron, and a sadist to boot.

So my world is on a big plywood table in an attic. My town is background atmosphere for a lousy electric train. I don't know what I'm supposed to be. A motherly old soul glimpsed through a house window, I guess. An intimate detail. It gives me a pain.

If you think it's fun to live in a town on a model railroad, you've got rocks in your head.

Look at it from our point of view. In the first place, ELM POINT isn't a town at all — it's a collection of weird buildings that Willy Roberts and his old man took a fancy to and could afford. It isn't even sharp for a model railroad town; the whole thing is disgustingly middle class.

Try to visualize it: there's a well in the middle of the table, a hole for Willy Roberts to get into when he works the transformer and the electric switches. The whole southern end of the table is covered with a sagging mountain made out of chicken wire and wet paper towels. The western side has got a bunch of these sponge rubber trees I was telling you about,

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and just beyond them is an empty area called Texas. There are some real dumb cows there and two objectionable citizens who come to our town every Saturday night and try to shoot up the place. The Ohio River starts in the northwestern corner of the table and flows into the southeast, where I guess it makes a big splash to the floor. (No one has ever gone over to look.) Our town and a mountain take up the northern end of the table and part of the eastern side. That's where I live, as a matter of fact — on the eastern side, between the Ohio River and the water-tower.

Now catch this building inventory, Clyde — it'll kill you. We've got a police station and a firehouse in North Flats, at the edge of the mountain where the tunnel comes out. There's a big tin railroad station with a red roof. There's a quaint old frame hotel that was left over from the Chicago Fire, and right behind it there's this diner that was supposed to look like an old street-car. There's one gas station with three pumps, but no cars. There's a big double-spotlight on a tin tower right across from my house; I have to wear dark glasses all the time. There's seven lower-class frame houses with dirty white curtains in the windows; Humphery and I live in one of them. Humphery — that's my husband, or would be if Willy Roberts had thought to put a preacher in this hole — works in the tin switchman's house up the tracks. Whenever one of those damned trains comes by he has to goose-step out and wave his stupid red lantern. Clyde, he hates it. Then there's a cattle pen on a siding, with no wind to blow the smell away, if you get what I mean.

That's about it — a real Paradise.

Willy's got two trains on the table now. One is a flashy passenger job stashed full of stuck-up aristocrats — you know, the kind who are always reading the *Times* when they go through your town. The other is a freight train that doesn't carry anything; it just grinds around the track like a demented robot, and its only job, as far as *I* can tell, is to shuttle itself onto a siding and look respectful when the passenger train full of city slickers hisses by. As if all this racket weren't enough, Willy's got him a switch engine too, and he keeps it in our front yard. It's got a bell.

There's more, too, but we'll get to that.

How do you like our town, Clyde? Interesting? I want to tell you something else: our town is planning to commit a murder.

Guess who.

You just stick around awhile.

You know, our town is all gray and lazy when the current isn't on, just like I said. Nobody's got much energy; I must be just about the only one awake in ELM POINT at night. It gets pretty lonesome.

But the door to the attic is opening now and here comes Willy the

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Kid. Hang on, Clyde — all hell will pop loose in a minute. You'll have to excuse me for a minute; I have to wake Humphery up and get him down to his tin house. It's terrible — you almost have to dent Humphery to wake him up like this. And for what? Everytime he wakes up he has to go to that damfool switchman's house and make with the red lantern.

Fine thing. Well, I'll be back later. And say, Clyde, if you ever see this Willy character, tell him not to shake the whole lousy table when he drags his body into the well, will you?

Willy Roberts surveyed his model railroad without pleasure. He could remember the time when it had given him a real boot, but after all he was thirteen years old now. He felt slightly ashamed that he should want to mess with it at all, but it was better than getting kicked around in football by all the big guys in the neighborhood. And Sally had said she was going to the show with Dave Toney, damn her.

Willy clicked on the transformer rheostat and watched the lights come on.

He knocked with his knuckles on the blue tin roof of the switchman's house. "Let's get with it, Humphery boy," he said. He always called the switchman Humphery — always had, ever since he was a kid and had carried on long, friendly conversations with the switchman. Boy, what a creep he had used to be! "Come on, Humph, or I'll tear your arm off. Whadaya want, boy — time and a half for overtime? Union shop? On the ball — here comes the Black Express, full of FBI agents after the atom spies. . . ."

He pressed the START button and the passenger train slipped its wheels on the tracks and picked up speed. It zipped by the switchman's shack, and out came Humphery with his red lantern, right on schedule. "What a brain you got, Humph," Willy said. "Boy, you're a genius." He speeded up the passenger train and sent it careening through the tunnel into ELM POINT. He blew the whistle. He made artificial black smoke pour out of the locomotive's smokestack.

Willy waited until the Black Express had got by the siding and wavered into the end mountain tunnel, and then he sent his freight chugging out of the cattle pen onto the main line. He sent *that* rattling through ELM POINT, tweaking old Humphery's cap when he jerked out with his lantern, and then stopped it on the bridge over the Ohio River. He clapped his hands together.

The Black Express charged full speed across Texas, knocking a cow off the track, and ploughed full-tilt into the stalled freight on the bridge. Both engines jumped the track and landed in the cellophane of the Ohio River. One little man fell out of the caboose and got caught under a wheel.

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Willy grinned.

"Pretty good, hey Humphery?" he said.

He cut the power for a second, righted the trains, and set them in reverse to see how fast they would go. Then he ran the freight back onto a siding and began to send the Black Express backwards and forwards over the switch, so he could watch old Humphery dart in and out of his tin shack waving his lantern like a demon.

"Get with it, Humphery," cried Willy. "You only live once!"

Humphery didn't say anything, Willy noticed.

Too busy, probably.

Well, now you've met our lord and master, Clyde. A real All American Junior. I tell you, ELM POINT is a madhouse when that kid is in the attic. It's bad enough on the rest of us, but it's killing Humphery.

Things have settled down a little at the moment. The freight is sitting in the siding by the cow pen, and Willy's got the passenger job on automatic. Once every 47 seconds it comes yelling and smoking through my side-yard, and five seconds later poor Humphery has to stagger out and wave his red lantern at the snobs in the club car.

The spotlights are on, too, but Willy hasn't turned off the light in the ceiling yet, so it isn't too bad. Willy's sitting in the well reading a sex magazine, so I guess he won't be wrecking any more trains for while.

Maybe you wonder what will happen to the man who fell out of the caboose in the wreck. More likely, you don't care. But I'll tell you his name: Carl. None of us have any last names. Carl's too busted up to fix, so Willy will throw him in the wastebasket. Tender, isn't it? It chokes you all up with sentiment. We'll sort of have a funeral for Carl after the town gets turned off again, if we can stay awake, and you know what we'll be thinking? We'll be thinking that's the end of the road for all of us here in ELM POINT — the wastebasket.

It's a great life. You'd love our town, Clyde.

Let me tell you about our town, Clyde. It's different when the current's turned on. You'd hardly know the old dump, believe me.

Everybody has to go through the proper motions, you see? Like poor old Humphery with his lantern. There's Patrick, the cop, out in front of the police station. He just stands there blowing his tin whistle like he was Benny Goodman or somebody. Inside, they've got this one prisoner, name of Lefty. He's never been outside a cell; I don't know what he's supposed to have done. Then there's a joker over at the firehouse. All he's done for the last seven years is slide up and down this silly pole. Maybe you think *he* isn't sore at night.

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Everyone that can rushes around like mad when the current's on. It's the only time we're really active and feeling good, do you see? We can't add anything to what's already here in ELM POINT, but we can use what we've got as long as Willy can't see us. Some of us, like poor Humphery or the policeman, have to work when the current's on, because that's their job. But some others, the background characters, can sneak off and visit once in a while. The favorite place is inside the hollow mountain. You'd be surprised at what goes on in there, Clyde.

The only rest room in town is in the gas station, and that's all the place is used for. It's ridiculous. They only know how to serve one dish at the diner, because that's all that was on the counter. Bacon and fried eggs and coffee. You think about it, Clyde. Two meals a day every day for seven years. That's a lot of bacon and eggs. You lose your taste for them after awhile.

The train runs right by the side of the hotel, only two inches away. It rattles the whole thing until it's ready to fall apart, and every time it goes by it pours black smoke in through the upstairs window. There's a tenant up there, name of Martin. He looks like he's made out of soot.

The whole town is knee-deep in dust. Did you ever see a kid clean anything that belongs to him? And there's no water, either. That cellophane in the Ohio River may look good from where you stand, but it's about as wet as the gold in Fort Knox. Not only that, but it crinkles all the time where it flows under the bridges. It's enough to drive you bats.

You're beginning to see how it is, Clyde. This town is ripe for one of those lantern-jawed, fearless crusading reporters — you know, the kind that wears the snap-brim hat and the pipe and is always telling the city editor to stop the presses — but Willy forgot to give us a newspaper.

It isn't much of a life, to my way of thinking. You do the best you can, and get up whenever some dumb kid hits a button, and then you get tossed in the wastebasket. It seems sort of pointless.

You can't really blame us for deciding to kill him, can you Clyde? What else can we do? After we get rid of him there's no telling what will happen to us. But it's like living in the panther cage, you see — a move in any direction is bound to be an improvement.

Know what we're going to do, Clyde?

We're going to *electrocute* Willy.

With his own electric train.

We think that's pretty sharp.

I don't want you to get the idea that I'm just a sour old woman, Clyde — a kind of juvenile delinquent with arthritis. I'm not, really. You know,

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a long time ago, when Willy was younger, even ELM POINT wasn't so bad.

Humphery wasn't working so hard then, and at night, when our town was all gray and lazy, I used to try and write poetry. I guess you find that pretty hard to swallow, and I admit that it wasn't very good poetry. Maybe you wonder what I found to write about in this dump. Well, one night they left the attic window open and I heard a *real* train, away off in the distance. I wrote a poem about that. You probably don't care about poetry, Clyde. Anyhow, if you're like the creeps around here, you wouldn't admit it if you did.

I'll tell you, though — it's funny. Sometimes, a long time ago, I'd go and sit down by that silly cellophane river and I'd almost get to where I liked it here.

If it just hadn't been for that damned train every 47 seconds whenever the current was on . . .

It's too bad Willy had to change, huh Clyde? He wasn't so bad before — just kinda dumb and goggle-eyed. He and Humphery used to get along pretty good, but like I say it was a long time ago.

I can see I'm boring you, talking about the past and all. You think it's morbid. I guess you're right; I really shouldn't have mentioned it.

Here comes poor old Humphery, dragging in from the switchman's house. Look at him — man, he's really beat to the socks. He can hardly put one foot in front of the other. He's old before his time, Humphery is.

You'll excuse me for awhile, won't you? Humphery and I have to go down to the diner for a cup of coffee. Maybe we'll have some bacon and eggs too, if we can stand it again. I hadn't noticed how late it was getting.

We'll have to go to work on that transformer tonight, if some of us can stay awake. This stuff has got to go, don't you agree?

I'll see you later, Clyde.

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since I last had a bull session with you, Clyde — or at least it *would* have if there'd been any water in that lousy Ohio River. All it does is crinkle. You have no idea how that can get on your nerves.

Our town is turned off again, all gray and lazy. I know I use that phrase too much, but I'm afraid I've got kind of a literal mind, if you know what I mean. ELM POINT *is* gray and lazy when the current's turned off, so that's what I say it is.

I guess I'm a realist, Clyde.

I'm not the only one awake tonight, though, I'll tell you that. I swear I've never seen so many people up and around at night in this burg. Even

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Smoky — he's the guy who has to slide up and down that pole over at the firehouse — is sort of waddling around. He's kind of bowlegged, you know.

To tell you the truth, we're all pretty nervous.

A bunch of the guys have been doing their best on the transformer over in the kid's well. It wasn't easy to get to it, but they managed it by using one of the crane cars from the freight train.

It's awfully quiet here in town tonight, even with all the people up and around. I don't know when I've heard it so quiet. You probably think we've turned chicken or something. You probably think we're scared.

You're right.

I wonder how you would feel. Have you ever been *disconnected*, Clyde?

We've got a chance, the way we figure it. If we can just get rid of Willy, maybe they'll let us alone for awhile. We'd have strength enough to send a crew down to plug in the town once in a while, when nobody was around. It would be so wonderful — you have no idea. It isn't asking very much, is it?

Of course, it can't last long. Maybe we'll all get stuffed back in a box after a while. Maybe they'll melt us down. Maybe, if we're lucky, we'll be given away and go to some other town.

But if we can only live a week like human beings, it'll be worth the effort. I guess I'm getting maudlin. Sorry, Clyde. You know how it is when you get old.

Sure, we're scared. Win or lose, though, what are the odds? I ask you. Anything's better than the wastebasket, that's the way we figure it.

The attic door is opening, Clyde. Light is streaming in from the stairs.

I feel terrible.

Here comes Willy.

Willy Roberts wiggled under the table and came up in the control well. The train wasn't a kick like the pinball machine, no argument there, but at least it was cheaper. He hadn't won a free game in a month.

He knocked with his knuckles on the blue tin roof of the switchman's house. "Let's get with it, Humphery boy," he said. "Oil up the old leg and light the red lamp."

Willy surveyed the table top with a jaundiced eye. Let's see now, what were the possibilities? If he played his cards right, it just might be *possible* to set the switch engine on the siding down by the cow pen, and then start the Black Express from the gas station and the freight from Texas. That way, he could have a three-way wreck.

It wouldn't be easy, though. It would take some doing.

He swatted the tin roof of the switchman's shack again and drummed on it with his fingernails. "Dig this, Humphery," he said.

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The situation, he reflected, had definite possibilities.

Willy took the transformer rheostat between his thumb and index finger and clicked it on.

Then he pressed the red START button with the middle finger of his right hand.

There was a small yellow spark and a faint smell of burning insulation. Willy jerked his tingling finger away and stood up straight, staring at his model railroad accusingly.

"Damn it," he said, "that *hurt*."

He reached out quite deliberately and ripped the transformer from its track connection. He pulled out the wall plug with a jerk on the wire. Then he took careful aim and threw the transformer as hard as he could at the spot where the walls converged in the corner of the attic.

The transformer hit with a thud, chipping the wall plaster. It bounced off the wall, crashed into the top of the mountain, and rebounded off again to land with a squashing smash on the police station. The plastic policeman with his tin whistle was under it when it fell.

Willy socked the tin switchman's house with his fingernail, almost knocking it over. "Think you're pretty cool, don't you Humphery boy?" he asked, rubbing his smarting finger. "After all I've done for you, too."

He studied his model railroad thoughtfully for a long time. Finally, Willy made his decision. He was getting too old for this junk anyhow, he reasoned. What he needed was something else.

Willy smiled at the railroad. "You know what I'm going to do to you?" he asked loudly. "I'm going to convert you to cash. How do you like that?"

He turned out the light and left the attic.

No current at all is coming through and our town is black.

How did you like that, Clyde? All that work on the transformer and what do we get? One stinking spark. Like sticking your finger on a lightning bug. Deadly as a water pistol.

I'm not too surprised, to tell you the truth. Patrick the cop warned us; he was in another town before Willy bought him, and they tried the same thing there. Not enough volts for anything but a little shock. Maybe you've been shocked by a model railroad yourself, Clyde. You think about it a little.

Sure, we knew it wouldn't work. So what? You've got to believe in something, Clyde, even when you know you're kidding yourself. What else is there to do? And maybe we could hope that by some chance, just this once . . .

But it's over now, been over for a week. This is the first I've felt like

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talking. You know. There wasn't much left of Patrick when the transformer hit him. I guess Lefty got his inside — nobody's had enough energy to dig in and see.

Poor old Humphery is hardly himself anymore; he got shaken up pretty badly when Willy socked the switchman's shack. I guess the worst part is mental, though. It's hard to see how things can get much worse in ELM POINT.

Do you know a good psychiatrist, Clyde?

I guess I sound like one of those old bats who spend their waking hours giving recitals of their aches and pains and their sleeping hours dreaming about men under their beds. I'm getting to be crummy company. But it *is* hard to talk now. It used to be that when the transformer was turned off a little current would seep through anyhow, but not anymore. We don't even have a wire into the wall plug. The joint is like a morgue in a coal mine.

I hear footsteps on the stairs.

The door is opening — the light hurts my eyes.

Here they come, Clyde.

A whole *herd* of them.

Willy Roberts rubbed his hands together expectantly. Just about every kid in the neighborhood had showed up, and some of them were fairly well loaded.

"Take it easy, Mac," he said. "One at a time. Let's not mess up the table, guy — this is a valuable set."

Not bad, he told himself. Pretty good in fact. No doubt about it — he had a genius for business.

"Whatcha want for the gas station, Willy?" asked Bruce Golder from down the street.

"What'll you give me?"

"Fifty cents."

"Fifty *cents?*"

"Fifty cents."

"Sold."

Willy pocketed the money. It felt good.

"How about the switchman, Willy?" said Eddie Upman, the rich kid from up the hill.

Willy hesitated, just for a second. He and Humphery had been together for a long time. But what the devil. He wasn't a kid anymore. Humphery had cost five dollars new, and prices had gone up since then.

"Two bucks four bits," Willy announced, crossing his fingers.

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"Make it two bucks even," said Eddie Upman, taking out his billfold.

Willy looked around, but no one topped the bid. "Sold," he said, and Eddie Upman took Humphery and put him in a sack.

"Let's get rid of the houses before we start on the track and stuff," Willy said. "Who wants 'em?"

Nobody said anything.

"They're *good* houses," Willy insisted. "People inside and everything. See?"

Silence.

"Aw come on. A buck for the lot."

No takers.

"Fifty cents. This is the last chance on these, you guys. I'll burn 'em before I'll give 'em away."

Mark Borden slowly fumbled in his pockets and came up with a quarter, four nickels, and five pennies. "I'll take them," he said. "I guess I can use them."

"Sold!" said Willy, pocketing the money. "Now, what am I offered for the good mountain? I'll make it easy on you. Let's see, about a buck ought to be right. . . ."

Willy Roberts felt good. The table was being cleaned quicker than he had hoped, and the table itself ought to bring in some real dough. He smiled broadly when Bruce Golder bought the mountain.

Willy knew that he was a real man now.

I'm back, Clyde.

I guess you saw how they fought over me. Willy almost had to throw me into the fire. I'm a real queen, I am. I drive men mad.

I wish he'd burned me, Clyde. I really do.

I'm determined not to get all morbid and gloomy, so you won't be hearing from me again. I can't hold out much longer, and if I have to make with the blues I'll do it alone.

Maybe you'll be wondering about me — where I am, what I'm doing. Probably you don't give a damn. You're just like all the rest of them, aren't you? But just in case —

Let me tell you about our new town, Clyde. It'll kill you.

You see, I'm it. Or just about.

That's right. ELM POINT looks like Utopia from where I'm sitting. Mark Borden, the one that bought me, can't afford a real model railroad set-up, and his house doesn't even *have* an attic. So about once a week he takes us all out of his dirty closet, sets up his lousy circle of track, and starts up his wheezing four-car freight train. It isn't even a scale model. Big deal.

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He's got four houses that he spaces alongside the track when he's running the train; he doesn't much like the other three that he got from Willy, so he leaves them in the closet *all* the time. That's all there is, Clyde. Just me and the train. The other houses aren't even occupied, and the engineer on the freight is so embittered by now that he won't even wave.

I just sit in my stinking rocking chair and look out the window. Oh, it's delightful. I can see an old blue rug, a dresser with initials cut in it, a pile of dirty clothes in the corner, and a bed that's never made.

Once in a while Mark, the little angel, gets out his lead men and plays Soldier. The first thing he does, see, is to build him a Lincoln Log fort, about a foot from my house. Then he sticks all these lantern-jawed jokers with broken rifles along the walls, and then he backs off about nine feet and sets up his Coast Defense Gun. You'd love that, Clyde. The Coast Defense Gun is a huge blue job that works on a big spring. Mark puts marbles in the barrel, cocks the spring, and then hollers "Fire!" like a maniac. The whole lousy gun jerks up on two folding stilts and hurls all the marbles at the log fort by my house.

Chaos results, Clyde.

Logs fly all over the place. Marbles swish through the air and roll under the bed like thunder. My house has two big holes in it, and all I can do is sit in this quaint old rocker and pray. I don't know whether to pray for a hit or a miss. Periodically, one of the marbles hits a soldier square in the face and knocks his head off.

Charming.

And there's one other minor detail. Ants. We have ants. I don't think I'll tell you about them, though. You just think about it a while.

That's about all. You see how it is, Clyde. I've enjoyed talking to you, but now there doesn't seem to be much to say. I won't bother you anymore.

There's only one thing, Clyde. I wouldn't even ask, but I *am* getting old and corny. It's about Humphery. The one named Eddie Upman bought him, and he's got a lot of money. I heard Willy say so. That probably means a big table and another town and maybe some trees and rivers.

I wouldn't want you to go to any trouble, Clyde. But if you should ever be in Eddie Upman's house, maybe you could go up to the attic for a minute. Maybe you could see Humphery. You wouldn't have to do anything drooley or sentimental; I know you couldn't stand that. But maybe you could sort of accidentally leave the current on low when you leave, without running the trains.

Old Humphery would like that.

Would you do that, Clyde — for me?

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Medicine seems to rank along with criminalistics and linguistics among the most unjustifiably neglected sciences in science fiction. Despite an occasional classic such as Lester del Rey's Nerves *or William Morrison's* Country Doctor, *even Groff Conklin would find it impossible to assemble a specialized collection of medical s.f. Which is why F&SF is happy to number among its contributors a physician (pseudonymously free to criticize his own profession), who gives us here some provocative thinking on the interplanetary future of coronary surgery . . . and of sacrosanct specialists.*

A Matter of Ethics

by J. R. SHANGO

It happened in the transition from planet-gravity to free-space drive. Mendez's last words had been a not too polite jest about a Martian dancer they'd seen the night before. And now he was sprawled there, clutching his chest, his face the color of sour milk.

Colby fixed the time on his watch. The transition period hadn't been more than a minute at most.

"What is it, Doctor Mendez?" Colby felt for his pulse. Fast, thready, shocky. Mendez's lips were compressed so tightly together there was a ring of white around them where the blood had been forced away.

"Pain in your chest?" Colby thought he saw a slight attempt to nod his head. With the icy ringing pain crushing his heart, it took a strong man to even nod.

Swiftly Colby got the Cardisev from the emergency locker in the cabin bulkhead, broke off the plastic guard and injected two cc's intramuscularly. Then he pulled gently on Mendez's arm, holding up the syrette so Mendez could see what he wanted. Slowly Mendez let his arm come out straight. Colby grabbed across the biceps muscle of the upper arm and squeezed, engorging the veins. Deftly he inserted the needle into the bulging cephalic vein and injected a small amount directly into the bloodstream. Almost instantly Mendez relaxed, then went deeper and deeper into unconsciousness. Colby watched him carefully, took a small ophthalmoscope out of his pocket and examined the vessels on the retina to see how constricted they were. Finally he took the syrette out of the vein and threw it away. He sat

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down beside Mendez and found himself wet with perspiration, his hand trembling, his knees and elbows stiff from the strain. He didn't work on a patient of Mendez's eminence every day.

He checked the time on his watch again. Ten minutes. It was certainly a coronary. Mendez wasn't too old, but he was in a position of wealth and authority. He no longer needed to worry about pleasing other people so he'd let his body go. A common enough situation with specialists; no inherent sense of artistry except in connection with one thing. They could be perfectionists in fire sculpture, hypothalamic surgery, or Venusian phonetics, but they didn't carry over their perfectionism to the care of their bodies and this was what happened. The coronary vessels of the heart wall had lost their resiliency — perhaps foolish or capricious eating habits had thickened the vessel walls — and now, a sudden stress, the cushioned acceleration of the space drive, and a slight alarm reaction, the coronary vessels constrict stopping the flow of blood to the heart wall, pain in the heart, more alarm, more constriction, more pain. A vicious circle, and if it lasts over a minute, clots start forming in the vessels, and cells in the heart wall begin to die from lack of blood. If the lack is long enough a large area of the heart wall will die. If it is large enough, nothing can save the victim except immediate intervention by a skilled mural cardiosurgeon, like Mendez.

Colby sighed. Yes, like Mendez. Not like Colby. He'd only had five years residency in surgery, then five years in cardiology, then three years in mural cardiosurgery. Thirteen years in labs, autopsy rooms, surgical amphitheaters. Thirteen years of emergency call, interrupted sleep, hasty meals, and class four subsistence level pay. Thirteen years and then he'd taken his examination for the Intergalactic Board of Mural Cardiosurgery.

And what had Mendez said? Mendez, the president of that august body! "It would be criminal for you to operate on humans at this stage in your development." Criminal! And what had the Board recommended? Five more years of special supervised training under a Board man!

Five more years of crap from Harkaway!

Colby checked the time and the pulse and the respirations. Quieting down a bit. Nothing to do for the moment but wait and let the vessels relax, adjust the Cardisev dosage to fit the changing physiology.

Colby picked up the phone and told the operator to summon the rocket's doctor. Then he waited and while he waited he thought. He'd put in three of those five extra years already. Three onerous, wasted years with that nut Harkaway. Three years doing over the things he'd learned and relearned and rerelearned. It would be different if he'd taken up valvular cardiosurgery. There you had four valves to mess with and quite a variety of techniques and operations. But no, he'd specialized in mural cardiosurgery. The

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walls of the heart. Only one technique, really only one successful operation: the Chauncey operation. It seemed simple enough. Excise the bloodless, dying area of the heart wall under deep hibernative anesthesia and sew in a plastic patch with the edges in healthy tissue. The patch was contractile and conductive to electrical impulses. It simulated the action of the branching cardiac muscle fibrils perfectly, and it preserved the continuity of the electrochemical network that initiated and synchronized the heart action. *When* it worked. And it always worked, said the Board, when the operation was correctly performed.

And how many times had he performed the operation? Thousands. On all sorts of living animals. On numerous post mortem human hearts. On three condemned psycho-resistant criminals. On seven Adromedan humanoid P.W.'s. The films were in the records to show his deftness, his meticulousness, his skill. He'd always been good with his hands, but after that much training even a palsied alcoholic cretin would have been good. And how many times had the patch worked for him? Not once.

Because, said the Board: 1) the patch is designed and balanced to fit the physiology of the damaged heart, not the healthy; 2) only diplomates of the Board have the finesse to fit it properly in place.

The light flashed over the door and the clicking started. He pressed the button on the chair arm and the rocket's doctor came in.

He looked at Mendez. Felt his pulse. Picked up the Cardisev syrette and turned to Colby, his eyebrows raised, his lids slightly wider than they'd been at dinner listening to Mendez the surgical god.

"Caught him during the drive transition," said Colby.

Jorgenson pursed his lips and held the syrette up to the lighter ceiling area, estimating the amount used.

"I gave him a heavy dose, but I'm inclined to think the area is extending. Held him too long for it to be just temporary vessel spasm."

Jorgenson shook his head. "I'm glad you're along this trip."

"I can't do any more than you can. I'm not a diplomate of the Board. Just eligible. They'd slap me with a manslaughter charge just as fast as they would you."

Jorgenson started. "Suppose he goes out?"

"What would you do? It's not only a violation of law, it's a violation of ethics. I'd lose my license. I'd lose sixteen years of specialty training. And I'd get psychiatric alteration as well."

Jorgenson sucked in the inside of his cheek and chewed on it a little. "The operation may be performed only by a Board man or under direct supervision of a Board man," he quoted more or less accurately from the law.

"And you can't supervise under hibernative anesthesia," said Colby.

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Jorgenson shook his head. "Nope. Guess he's got himself. We could take him down to surgery and operate and if he died say we did it post mortem. I have the authority to post anyone in flight, for reasons of planetary medical security. But if he lived until we jetted in and then died, you'd be socked for manslaughter."

"And breach of ethics," added Colby. "How about getting the cardioscope up and we'll see if we can see anything yet?"

It was a somewhat risky job for the crew, getting the cardioscope out of the unshielded storage space, but they got it. It was a small machine which fed the multiple electrocardiograph leads to an integrating device that projected a composite oscillogram for direct reading. They watched the light lines form, fluctuate, waver, strengthen, finally the pattern hardened. There was the depressed S-T segment, the cove plane inversion of the T wave. At first it wasn't too clear, but after about an hour the pattern was diagnostic, even without any knowledge of his normal gram. Occlusion of the coronary vessel supplying the anterior wall of the heart. They had to administer Cardisev a number of times in small doses before it looked as though it had stopped spreading.

"If you want me for anything, Doctor, just call," said Jorgenson.

Colby busied himself with a chart of the dosages, and the pulse and cardiogram changes. Finally he thought he could risk bringing Mendez up. The flaccid face muscles pulled the sagging face together as they gained tone. It was like watching putty assume form under the artist's hands. The dominant, incisive nose even seemed to gain in size as Mendez came up. The rock-like chin grew sturdier, the deep lines deeper. Finally his eyes opened, swept across the ceiling, wavered, closed again, opened again and came over to Colby. For a while he just looked at him. Checked each feature. Fastened lastly on his eyes.

"How bad?" Mendez said softly.

"Anterior. Not too large and not extending."

Mendez closed his eyes. His chin seemed to grow larger, set more firmly. The jaw muscles in his cheeks bunched as though he was testing them. He turned when Colby gave him another shot of Cardisev.

"How much?" asked Mendez.

Colby told him. It was just enough to keep his vessels relaxed now, it wouldn't be enough to disturb his conscious faculties.

Mendez took some deep breaths experimentally, smiled at Colby.

"Never realized how good that Cardisev was." Suddenly the shadows in the corners of his eyes seemed to deepen and his chin slid to one side as though he was thinking.

"Colby! What were you going to do if it had extended?"

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Colby looked down at his hands. Licked his lips with a tentative tongue. What did the old bastard want him to say? Might make a big difference on his Boards.

He looked at him. "Ethically, there isn't much I could do, but . . ." He hesitated over the words, gingerly testing each one as he spoke.

"But what?" said Mendez. He said it very softly. To Colby there seemed a hopeful, encouraging note in it. The same sort of note he'd heard before when he was exploring a theory that Mendez didn't like during the examination.

"But I wished there was some way I could have helped you."

"Humph!" snorted Mendez and lifted his eyes back to the ceiling.

"Let's see the cardioscope," he said.

Colby turned it so he could see it and switched it on.

Mendez didn't like it. It was more definite now, and perhaps a bit larger. It was getting near the critical level. Anything could tip him now.

Suddenly Mendez swung his beaky face back to him.

"How about the deceleration transition?"

It stunned Colby. He hadn't thought of that. Mendez might not be able to stand the shock. The margin of safety was not large enough to experiment with. If he lost any more tissue during the deceleration there would be no time to operate. The heart would either fibrillate, or so much muscle be involved that it could not contract and express an adequate amount of blood. He would be dead before they could get through the pericardium.

The realization of death flowed between them. He takes it well, thought Colby with that little bit of mind that seems to stand apart from conscious processes to comment on them.

Mendez's narrow lips seemed to grow narrower.

"That's it, eh, Colby! That's what you're thinking, isn't it, Colby?"

Colby looked away. "Not necessarily. You stand a fair chance." The words sounded artificial as a funeral wreath.

"You know what you'd get if you told me that on an exam, Colby!"

Colby didn't answer. But he knew. It was a chance no one would take who knew anything about the matter. It was graver than that. There was the imminent possibility of something happening in flight. Right now. Anything might exhaust his reserve. A sudden shift in course, a fright, a fall, any of a hundred thousand little things, a nightmare, a difficult b.m., a sneeze, anything from excessive worry to laughter. No, the best thing to do was to operate immediately. Rocket landings weren't intended for bum hearts. If he survived without a patch it would be a fluke.

"How long was I out?"

"About two and a half hours," said Colby.

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"From transition?"

"From transition."

"We have plenty of time then." He was silent. Calculating something, Colby thought. His will, probably. It would be pretty meaty if he was a typical Board man. They're all very wealthy. Should be, judging by the number of operations they do and the astronomical fees they charge. And they don't overwork, in spite of the high incidence of coronaries among humanoids. Plenty of trusted and trained dogs like me, mused Colby, to carry the burden of the diagnostic work and the emergency preparation. A few minutes at the crucial part of the operation was enough work for them, sometimes they observed the rest, sometimes not. You'd think with a future like that everyone strong enough to stand at an operating table would be trying to get into mural cardiosurgery. Yet they weren't. Probably the lengthy training and the arduous reviewing for the exams had something to do with it. But the singular fact that year in and year out, regardless of the number of examinees, the number of living members of the Board never seemed to increase probably had a good deal more to do with it.

Perhaps they're right in their exclusiveness, shrugged Colby with his forebrain. Certainly whenever the procedure was attempted by a surgeon who was not a Board diplomate the patient died. The Board invariably said he had not evaluated the criteria correctly or his technique was faulty. It was a good twenty years now since it had been made part of interplanetary law that an automatic charge of manslaughter be preferred against anyone performing the operation other than Board men or under their direct supervision. The medical profession generally felt the law was superfluous since ethics covered the situation fairly well, but the interplanetary legal administrators apparently didn't agree.

"You'll have to try it, Colby." Mendez's voice was quietly determined.

Try it, Colby. Go ahead, try it. You've got nothing to lose. Except your frontal lobes. When the psychs get through with you you won't even remember trying it. They'll give you a nice easy machine to operate for the rest of your life.

This wouldn't be like Chauncey; they'd had no automatic manslaughter law in those days. Colby looked at Mendez's hands. The hands that had operated on Chauncey. Chauncey, the discoverer of the technique, known as widely for his philosophical writings as for his famous operation. The man who, after the disappointing failure of the highly touted embryological transplants, had revived interest in the possibilities of a surgical treatment for coronaries. Chauncey had died the week after he published the operation. Of a coronary. Mendez, his assistant, had operated, but he'd been unable to save him. It had extended too far. Shortly thereafter Mendez had

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founded the Board, and he'd been either president or secretary of the Board for alternate terms ever since.

"I . . . I don't know."

Mendez curled his lip. "What don't you know? This is what you've been wanting, isn't it? You've wanted to be a mural cardiosurgeon! You've trained long enough, God knows. Well, here's your chance!"

Colby felt himself begin to tingle. His palms were wet again. By Solar, there may be a way yet. If Mendez wanted him to do it enough he could make him a Board member here and now. A bargain! Before, all he'd had to offer Mendez was competition. Make me a Board member and I'll compete with you for cases. I'll set up a clinic of my own. I'll share your fame and fortune. No wonder he hadn't been anxious to welcome him in, any more than master jetmen welcome apprentice jetmen, or master plumbers apprentice plumbers. But now! He could offer him his life in return. A bargain. A simple bargain. And like all bargains it would be wise to get all the details out of the way. Colby raised his eyes to Mendez's.

"You yourself said I wasn't ready yet." Colby watched Mendez's lids flick up. "In fact, you said it would be criminal for me to operate. That it would be better for me to let the man die normally than to kill him with surgery I was incapable of. Kill him, you said."

Mendez's cold eyes winked shrewdly. "Yes," he said slowly, "yes, I recall saying that. But that was three years ago." He paused. "Since then many things have changed. Techniques have changed. You have changed. Harkaway tells me you are much improved."

"He told me a couple more years."

"Perhaps he is too conservative. I will go over the procedure with you step by step. You will use my instruments. I have watched you work with me on this lecture trip and I have confidence in you."

He paused, cocked his head analytically, looking toward the golden future. "You know what this will mean, when you are successful. It practically insures your admission to the Board. Possibly a year or so more training under Harkaway since he is your superior and we can't go over his head. But I can practically guarantee your admission the next time your name comes up."

Practically! Sure, practically. Harkaway may not recommend me. The police may say I'm a criminal guilty of attempted murder. Colby could imagine Mendez shrugging his shoulders, smiling with mock rue. "You know I'm sorry, Colby, but after all I'm not the law."

Colby shook his head. "I don't see how I can do it, I really don't."

Mendez suddenly tightened up and lay back, his head twisted on his neck, his lips a thin faint line.

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Colby quickly found a vein and shot the Cardisev in. He took his wrist and checked the pulse rate . . . dropping gradually, gradually. Mendez slowly relaxed, slowly the stiffness left his neck, slowly he turned back to Colby, his face a bloodless, pain-etched mask of tallow. In those few minutes he had aged horribly.

He opened his mouth and breathed through it a few times before he spoke. "We'll have to chance it, Colby." His voice was a hoarse whisper. "It's the only chance I have. It may be too late in five minutes. It may extend while we're talking."

"Like Chauncey," Colby said, almost unconsciously.

"Why did you say that?" spat Mendez so vehemently that Colby sprang back away from the bed. "Why? Damn you! Why?"

"Why . . . why . . . it just struck me that you were then the student operating on the master, and now I'm to be the student operating on the master."

Mendez looked at him a moment, then his lips drew back from his teeth and his eyes squinted up. "Sometimes, Colby, I wonder what you young fellows think about!" His face became all deep wrinkles, seeming to center out from his mouth. It was a way he had of speaking through his teeth whenever he was excited. It almost seemed he was afraid to move his jaw for fear he'd bite the person he was speaking to. "What fantastic, sadistic, libelous dreams must wander around in your skulls!"

Colby listened outwardly. But he was used to tirades of all kinds. Sixteen years of residency work had inured him to the most biting sarcasm and the most personal obscenities. His objective was Board qualification and these things were all part of the initiation. They annoyed him and aroused bitterness in him, but once he'd made up his mind to take whatever came they only made him cling more resolutely to his course. It was the only way a resident could survive.

Mendez's face had a thin shine of perspiration all over it. He switched on the cardioscope and the lines flickered a moment then solidified. Rate a little faster, slight deepening of the T wave, but essentially the gram was the same.

"Don't believe it's wise for you to keep looking at that thing," said Colby.

"What did you decide?"

"You know the law: an automatic charge of manslaughter lodged against anyone attempting the operation who is not a Board member." Let the bastard sweat a while. Colby remembered the nausea before the exams. The constant attacks of diarrhea. The almost suicidal depressions after they announced his failure. Let him sweat.

"Listen, Colby. Have the rocket's captain and the doctor come down. I'll make a statement before them requesting that you perform it. That will

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protect you. As president of the Board I'll endorse your operating on me."

That could do it. He was getting close. Armed with that statement and a successful operation on a human, not an ordinary human, but a Board president, he couldn't be flunked again. Maybe he'd be able to avoid those last two years of Harkaway's castrating insolence and demeaning orders. The ridiculous way he raced around — "all the time you want up to twenty seconds." The man was insane.

But that could do it. That could get him Board qualification. *Could?* Colby wanted something that would, not could! Something he could count on. The Board was all powerful; what it giveth, it could also take away. He could hear Mendez weaseling out of it some way.

Colby looked at the deck. Have to phrase this right, no sense in twisting it off in him. He did look paler and tenser than was good. If it extended now and he died . . . Two years, a golden opportunity rusted away.

"Don't you think it would be better to have it down in writing, just in case . . ."

"Certainly, certainly. Have the captain and the doctor come down and I'll dictate it. But you won't need it, Colby. Nothing will happen to me. You'll do it, won't you!" It was a statement, not a question. His color was better now. His eyes glinted with the hard shine of polished steel. He thought Colby would do it.

Colby looked up at the security indicator set in the bulkhead. "It still doesn't fulfill the letter of the law. It says a Board member or under direct supervision of a Board member. They could still prosecute me under the criminal code."

"Well, I certainly can't supervise you while you're working on my heart." There was more than a little despair mixed with the sarcasm.

"No," said Colby softly. "No, that's true. But you can make me a member of the Board."

The words seemed to hang there, in the air between them. Though there were no echoes in that place of gleaming plastalloy and smooth curves, still they seemed to resonate and play in the recesses.

Mendez looked steadily down at his own feet, biting speculatively on the inside of his lip. Thinking, thinking. Colby could almost hear him thinking.

"I'd like to, Colby. Believe me, I would. And if I could, I would. But you know it takes four members to make an examining panel. Besides, there . . . besides . . ." The sentence trailed off somewhere in space.

Besides! Sure, besides! *Besides the Board is full!* Colby's mind completed the sentence. *There are no vacancies! There have been no vacating deaths among the membership.* That was the way it was. Besides! After he was well

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and down on earth and in the saddle again he'd dream up a lot more *besides*. He and that cockroach, Harkaway.

"I don't know," said Colby. "I'll have the captain and the doctor come down, and then I think I'll go into the chapel and pray for guidance."

"Guidance!" Mendez's eyebrows shot up into the air. "Listen, Colby, you don't need any guidance. You were good enough when you took your exam three years ago." A thin note of desperation pierced his voice. "Three years ago! Do you understand?"

"Take it easy, Doctor. I'll give you a bit more Cardisev."

"No, wait! I want to convince you, get your answer now. You don't need guidance." Mendez had long ago decided he himself was as much of a god as there was in the universe. "The Board is a sort of union. We keep the membership down to a limited number. For economic reasons. The operation itself is simple."

"Simple! Sixteen years now . . ."

"I know, I know. But there has been a . . . a . . . a new development." He seized on the words and raced ahead. "A new development that simplifies it considerably."

"I know of nothing new lately, other than the Peterman creatinine chain exposure. And that didn't help the technique any."

"No, no, not that. Only the Board men know about it. It's the scalpel blade."

Maybe he'd had too much Cardisev. Maybe he was going off his rocker. Have to operate fast, before he got hallucinatory and violent and blew the thing out. Colby started over to the emergency locker.

"No, wait, Colby! This is the truth. The blade is made of an isotopal alloy and acts as a catalytic agent. It catalyzes the reaction which seals the edges of the plastic patch to the heart wall. The sutures are just window dressing."

Could it be . . . Could the bastard be telling the truth?

"What is this alloy?"

"It's quite complex." The words fairly burst out of Mendez now, as out of a neurotic who has decided to confess all. "Contains a small amount of a radioactive isotope of the Martian elemental metal, Maranium. It acts on the trace metals in the muscle tissue, linking them ionically through their salts with the metals in the patch. Makes a continuous conductive pathway for the electrical component of the stimulating impulses. That, plus the tight seal, makes it work."

He pointed at his bag. "In there, in the little lead box on top, are twelve blades. Practically indestructible. One would last a lifetime. This lecture trip to Mars was just a cover. They're made up there to my specifications.

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I'm picking them up and taking them to earth. They're cheap, but I have to keep them limited. They're the secret of the whole thing. Without them the patch won't fuse and blows out every time."

"Every time?"

"Every time."

"Then even back when I took my exam . . . Even before that . . ."

"Yes, I lied." Mendez didn't hesitate, nor blush, nor falter, nor seem embarrassed. He was used to lying. "It's not new. Chauncey found it by accident. Didn't even know what he had. But you see how simple it is. You'll do it now, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll do it." There was strange new resolution in Colby's voice.

"Good. Then when we get back to earth, I'll see that you pass your exam."

"I'll want to take my exam right away."

Mendez looked away. "Well, Harkaway may have something to say about that. Have you ever done anything to antagonize Harkaway?"

Colby thought about it.

"No matter," Mendez hastened on. "We couldn't very well hurry it up. Would look very strange now that it's in the records that you have the five year period to serve."

"But what's the point? Now that I know the . . ."

Mendez cut in. "I'll have to ask you on your honor as a physician not to reveal any of this material." His eyes had that metallic luster again and his color was almost florid. He had Colby now. He was going to operate. He had dangled the Boards in front of him and he was his goat again. "It's an ethical problem of course. Medical ethics. Should you disregard my wishes in this matter you would probably shortly lose your license for breach of ethics." Suddenly his face relaxed into a smile.

"But why am I talking this way to you, John! No need to brief you on ethics. Not a man with your training."

"I'll get the captain," Colby said.

The captain came and the doctor, and the statement was taken and signed by everyone present. Colby tucked it away in his pocket, got the box of blades out of Mendez's bag and took them to his cabin where he put the box and the statement in his personal bulkhead safe.

The operating room was ready. Mendez was on the table, the field was prepared, and Colby was in the anteroom mixing the anesthetic. This first dose would be given intravenously, then the hypothermia apparatus on the table itself would rapidly bring the patient's body temperature down to

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hibernative levels where the blood flowed slowly and the heart action was markedly decreased. Colby swirled the anesthetic solution in the decanter, then slowly, meticulously he added 30 drops of epinephrine. Then he thought about it and added double that amount again. Epinephrine, the chemical of shock. The adrenals shot it into the bloodstream when the organism was threatened. It keyed it up, tensed it, stimulated it for the final supreme struggle. A few drops made the surface vessels constrict, the heart beat faster, the fingers quiver. A few drops. Thirty drops would jolt him the way breaking his legs with a baseball bat would jolt him. What would ninety drops do? Colby thought it would do enough. He filled the syringe and went into the O.R.

Colby wrote out a consultant's report and clipped it to the death certificate. "Patient expired during anesthetic induction. Undoubtedly due to an extension of the coronary occlusion." They would perform an autopsy on earth and what would they find? Evidence of an enormous coronary probably. Epinephrine is a normal constituent of blood and no one would run quantitative determinations. If they did no one would consider the matter other than a final massive shock reaction.

Communications relayed the sad news as soon as the rocket reached the ionosphere. When the rocket jetted down on the salt flats, Mendez's widow was waiting. And with her were two Board men, Harkaway and Gehman. Harkaway took Mendez's bag and nodded curtly to Colby. Colby returned the nod even more curtly.

The same day he requested an immediate examination in a visiogram to the secretary of the Board in Boston. He followed it with a visiostat of the Mendez statement. He got his reply at his apartment the next day.

"In view of the circumstances, the Board will make up a special panel and examine you as you request. But you must understand that in the event of failure, you will automatically be ineligible for reexamination for ten years, and in ad —" Colby didn't bother to read any further. He went over to Harkaway's office and got his scrub shoes and some things he kept in his locker. Harkaway sat there and watched him. Not saying a word. As Colby left he made a short prayer that he might never see the dyspeptic bastard again.

But when Colby arrived in Boston a week later, there was Harkaway in the examination room, his eyes glittering, his lips barely visible, his chin set stiff as concrete in his corroded face. He had got on the panel of examiners for this special session by personal request. He crouched at his place at the table, clasping and unclasping his hands, hunching his shoulders

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forward and rocking on the edge of his seat like an edgy boxer in his corner waiting to get at his opponent. The panel, by some common consent, let him ask Colby the first question.

He began with evident satisfaction. Almost smiling. "Describe in detail," — he lingered lovingly over *detail* — "giving accurately the amounts of all agents used according to the apothecaries' system, the method of standardizing crude digitalis leaf which employed the terminology 'cat units.' " He sat back glowing.

Digitalis, thought Colby, one of the ancient "natural" drugs used by witch doctors. And the apothecaries' system of measurement, a system known now only to antiquarians and esoteric Ph.D.'s. It would be nice to be able to give him the goddamn answer.

"Do you know the answer, Colby?" Harkaway jarred him out of his reverie.

"I think so, Harkaway."

Harkaway jumped like a galvanized muscle when Colby left off the *Doctor*. His nostrils flared sharply, and Colby could hear the breath whistling in and out.

"Well, what is it?" He bit the words off.

Colby took his time, looked up at the ceiling, let his gaze slide slowly back down to Harkaway . . . and smiled.

Harkaway was dead white, almost off his chair, his hands clenched before him, his pupils so dilated with rage that his eyes looked space black against the pallor of his skin. He opened his mouth to say something, but only a hoarse, cracked sound came out.

"Don't have a coronary, Harkaway," Colby chuckled. "There's one vacancy on the Board already."

"Would you kindly answer the question, Colby!" It was Feldman, the secretary.

Colby smiled at him too.

"It's all in the scalpel blade. A matter of a catalyzed reaction involving trace metals."

Feldman reached out and clicked off the recorder which kept the permanent records of the examinations.

They spent some time haggling over the details, but in the end everything was settled with nice attention to the ethical principles involved. Harkaway had to be given restoratives before he was able to leave the examination room. Colby passed, of course.

The press paid very little attention to his appoinment. In fact, even in medical circles there was no noticeable reaction when Colby was admitted

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to the Board. Perhaps it was this very lack of any previous publicity that so focused every news purveyor's hungry eye upon him when his monograph was published; in any event, they blazoned his name across space like a comet's tail. Suddenly every academic honor, and a good many unacademic ones, avalanched down on him for his discovery of a fact that, by their own admission, had previously escaped the notice of all the members of the Board, namely that the largest part of their success was due to their use of a rather unique scalpel blade. This revelation plus the simplified technique described by Colby in his monograph, made it possible for any general surgeon to perform the Chauncey operation successfully. Immediately there was a revision in interplanetary law, a marked drop in the mortality figure due to coronaries, and an even greater drop in the incomes of the members of the Board of Mural Cardiosurgery.

In the years that have passed since then, neither of these developments seems to have discomfited Colby. The blade, now professionally known as the Colby blade, is made exclusively by the Colby factory on Mars; and the tremendous galaxy-wide sale has made him a tidy fortune.

A good deal of this money he has generously devoted to aiding indigent surgical residents, alleviating a good deal of suffering in this almost universally oppressed group. In the light of this and his many other philanthropies, it is difficult for some to understand his persistent refusal to contribute to the Intergalactic Fund for the Rehabilitation of Board Mural Cardiosurgeons, a fund called into being by the affliction of increasing numbers of Board cardiosurgeons with acute forms of paranoia. Indeed, so many Board men have shown symptoms of this malady that it has come to be regarded in clinical circles as an occupational hazard.

On this basis the clinicians find it logical that the highest incidence is among the older members, but applying the same logic, they find it difficult to explain why one of the most frequent manifestations of the disease seems to be a fixed delusion that Colby is persecuting them. This delusion is particularly persistent and refractory to treatment, and the number of Board cardiosurgeons ultimately requiring psychiatric alteration has surprised even the psychiatrists, those arcanic practitioners who have so long and so frequently maintained that nothing could surprise them.

An equally astonishing number of Board men succumb each year to coronary disease. These deaths have also been attributed statistically to their paranoia, for the Board men display an amazing and obstinate reluctance to allow Colby or any of their former residents to operate on them, preferring to take their chances on physiologic survival. This can only be explained on the basis of lunatic doubts of the skill of their former residents, for they certainly could have no other reason to fear them.

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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITOR

IN OUR SURVEY of 1953's book-publishing (F&SF, March, 1954), McComas and I wrote of Theodore Sturgeon's MORE THAN HUMAN (Farrar, Straus & Young, $2; Ballantine, 35¢), "probably the *best* science fiction novel of 1953!"—and wondered at the time if we should even hedge with that cautious "probably."

It seemed rash to single one novel out of so rich a year as 1953—a much brighter period than 1954 has been so far; but apparently the experts are in full agreement with us, for MORE THAN HUMAN has just received the International Fantasy Award, bestowed by a panel of thirteen distinguished judges from the United States, England and France. And now, having been quite unable to get this beautifully written and sensitively conceived story of human symbiosis out of my mind for almost a year, I'll be even more rash and say that this is the finest novel yet to receive the IFA.

The runners-up are very nearly as impressive in quality of writing and thinking. Second place went to Alfred Bester's pyrotechnic ESP-detective story, THE DEMOLISHED MAN (Shasta, $3; Signet, 25¢), and third to the bitter satire on an advertising-agency future, THE SPACE MERCHANTS, by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth (Ballantine, hardcover $1.50, paper 35¢). Both of these novels were serialized in *Galaxy*, and a large portion of the Sturgeon novel first appeared as the *Galaxy* novella, *Baby Is Three*. My warm congratulations, not unmixed with envy, to *Galaxy* editor Horace Gold for publishing such notable stories.

Note of consolation: F&SF's BRING THE JUBILEE, by Ward Moore (Farrar, Straus & Young, $2; Ballantine, 35¢) very nearly ran in the money, and wound up in an unofficial fourth place, which is reasonably gratifying for the only F&SF-originated book eligible in the contest.

In previous years there was also an International Fantasy Award for non-fiction; but the judges have now decided that the problem of classifying the fantastic-but-factual is too difficult, and have dropped the award. [For the record, the Boucher-McComas vote for outstanding non-fiction went to J. Bronowski's lucid and illuminating THE COMMON SENSE OF SCIENCE (Harvard, $2).] As Jonathan Norton Leonard, science editor of *Time*, writes in FLIGHT INTO SPACE (Random, $3.50), "It is hard to judge

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at this fast-changing stage which apparent facts are fancies, and which apparent fancies are really embryonic facts."

Nevertheless books keep appearing which can hardly be described other than as "imaginative fact." Indeed there is developing something of a formula for s.f.-fact books, which has at least three key-ingredients: The author must glide as lightly as possible over the fact that all spaceflight-research is so sternly classified that he is in much the position of a writer treating The Future of the A-Bomb in 1944. The author must be careful to insert, at regular intervals, sneering references to science fiction. And no matter how pessimistic the author may be, the publisher's jacket copy must suggest that space travel is right around the corner.

I am not going to get into the pessimist-optimist argument. Obviously the facts for a rational debate are simply not available, and there is no point in arguing whether this or that aspect of spaceflight is a matter of tomorrow, the remote future, or never, unless one has at hand the reports of an unusually efficient spy-ring. But a number of recent books, of varying degrees of immediate optimism, deserve the attention of every science fiction reader.

Simplest and best of the lot is Charles Coombs's SKYROCKETING INTO THE UNKNOWN (Morrow, $4), which confines itself chiefly to the developments in jet and rocket aircraft during the past ten years, and their meaning as a prelude to spaceflight. Mr. Coombs writes with extraordinary clarity and an unusual ability to convey the adventurous excitement of factual progress; and his book is superbly illustrated with some 200 photographs and drawings of aircraft. It's essential reading for an understanding of the known achievements of *now*, before you begin dreaming of that hypergalactic overdrive.

Harold Leland Goodwin's THE SCIENCE BOOK OF SPACE TRAVEL (Watts, $2.95) is addressed, like the Coombs, to the older-boys-or-nonspecialist-adult group, and is also clear, simple, accurate and well illustrated (by Jack Coggins). Goodwin advances both optimist and pessimist arguments with quiet sensibility, and adds occasional fresh thinking of his own and a strikingly good brief annotated bibliography. Maybe a trifle elementary for Ley-Clarke habitués, but strongly recommended to others. The Leonard FLIGHT INTO SPACE quoted above is, for the general reader, as well written and readable as anything outside of Ley, with many observations on "the facts, fancies and philosophies" (as it is subtitled) underlying the spaceflight concept; it leans strongly toward the pessimist side, and performs some delightfully delicate needling of the grandiose Wernher von Braun — though Mr. Leonard is occasionally, in his own different way, quite as rashly opinionated, especially in his incredible statement that

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"There has been more change brought about by science in the lives of ordinary people in the past ten years than in the previous fifty."

Eric Burgess' ROCKET PROPULSION (Macmillan, $4.50) is almost exclusively for the technician. I'll go along with a review quoted on the jacket which says, "Considered as a technical book it is well written"; it is also crammed with tables and graphs which should make it invaluable to all s.f. writers and editors . . . and some of their more advanced readers. THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS OF FLIGHT (Harper, $3), "as visualized by Bernt Balchen and told to Erik Bergaust," suffers from an exasperating method of narration as a semi-fictionized droning dialog; but Col. Balchen's speculations on the future of private planes, helicopters and convertiplanes are of marked interest. His ideas on spaceflight (of the middling-optimistic school) are more familiar, if still worth listening to.

Martin Caidin's WORLDS IN SPACE (Holt, $4.95) is the most expensive and least necessary of this current crop; its material is readily available elsewhere more clearly organized and written in sentences more nearly resembling English prose. Spaceflight is one of the countless subjects treated in Alfred Gordon Bennett's FOCUS ON THE UNKNOWN (Library Publishers, $3.95), an inordinately ambitious book which tries to embrace almost every scientific or parascientific theme which might come under the fantasy-fact heading. The writing is characterized by prosaic stuffiness, a powerful will to believe, and a careless disregard for the nature of evidence.

To conclude this survey of spaceflight books on a brighter note: Arthur C. Clarke's three-year-old but still stimulating and valuable THE EXPLORATION OF SPACE is now available in an unabridged cheap reprint (Cardinal-Pocketbooks, 35¢).

Recommended fictional reprints: Michael Fessier's FULLY DRESSED AND IN HIS RIGHT MIND (Lion, 25¢), a captivating 1935 fantasy long out of print and overdue for revival; two firstrate fusions of science fiction and suspense by Wilson Tucker, 1952's THE LONG LOUD SILENCE (Dell, 25¢) and 1953's THE TIME MASTERS (Signet, 25¢); Robert Spencer Carr's lightweight but highly readable novelets, BEYOND INFINITY (Dell, 25¢); and William Tenn's largely familiar but impeccably chosen anthology, OUTSIDERS: CHILDREN OF WONDER (Permabooks, 35¢). Even more welcome news among anthology reprints: John W. Campbell, Jr.'s 1948 selection FROM UNKNOWN WORLDS is now at long last available in hard covers, imported from England (Street & Smith, 85¢).

Most rewarding of 1954's new novels this month is Richard Matheson's I AM LEGEND (Gold Medal, 25¢), an extraordinary book which manages to do for vampirism what Jack Williamson's DARKER THAN YOU THINK did for lycanthropy: investigate an ancient legend in terms of modern knowledge of

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psychology and physiology, and turn the stuff of supernatural terror into strict (and still terrifying!) science fiction. Matheson has added a new variant on the Last Man theme, too, in this tale of the last normal human survivor in a world of bloodsucking nightmares, and has given striking vigor to his invention by a forceful style of storytelling which derives from the best hard-boiled crime novels. As a hard-hitting thriller or as fresh imaginative speculation, this is a book you can't miss.

BEYOND EARTH'S GATES, by Lewis Padgett and C. L. Moore (Ace, 35¢) is a highly agreeable bit of alternate-world foolishness, in which a sympathetically unheroic hero finds himself drowning in the clichés (from the sinister highpriest to the fair princess) of the world of Malesco — an entertaining near-parody in much the vein of Murray Leinster's GATEWAY TO ELSEWHERE. The Ace double-volume also includes a welcome reprint of Andre Norton's excellent 1952 novel, STAR MAN'S SON, retitled DAYBREAK . . . 2250 A.D. L. Ron Hubbard's RETURN TO TOMORROW (Ace, 25¢) is his 1950 *Astounding* serial TO THE STARS — a surprisingly routine and plotless space opera about the young man who is shanghaied by the tough captain.

F&SF readers will be happy to learn that J. T. McIntosh's memorable *One* novelets are now gathered in hard covers (and emerging as a well-shaped and unified novel) as ONE IN THREE HUNDRED (Doubleday, $2.95).

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Earlier in this issue you read Judith Merril's study of the primitive, groping days of spaceflight, as seen through the eyes of a wife and a child. Now another writer new and welcome to F&SF examines a similar period, when public acceptance is as important as technological success, and shows that the military and the politicos can have problems as acutely personal as the domestic ones revealed by Miss Merril. Edmond Hamilton has been writing s.f. for over a quarter of a century, and is best known as a spinner of grandly cataclysmic space opera; but in recent years — especially in the novel CITY AT WORLD'S END (Fell, *1951*) *and such shorter stories as* What's It Like Out There? (Thrilling Wonder, *1952*) — *he has turned to more direct and plausible small-scale accounts of men and space, of which this latest, I think, is one of the most pointed and effective.*

Sacrifice Hit

by EDMOND HAMILTON

THE MESSAGE CAME from far away, a flutter in the ether that jumped at the speed of light, spreading and rippling and fading, but caught on Earth by one listening thing of wires and glass that changed it into a voice that spoke.

That was on the morning of October 9 at 5:06 Colorado time. The operator on duty, Sergeant Aiello, immediately punched a button of the intercom.

He said, "Major Cheers, an Urgent-and-Immediate from Fifteen."

"Give me the playback," said the major.

The sergeant switched the playback into the intercom circuit. There was a short silence. Then,

"Maintain contact, and tell them that I'm informing General Weiler at once."

"Yes, sir," said Sergeant Aiello. He cut the intercom, closed a switch, and spoke into the microphone. "Earth One to Fifteen. Earth One to Fifteen." He spoke his message, switched over, and then lit a cigarette. He looked up at Forney, the private in sloppy fatigues who had been mop-

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ping the floor but who had now come over and was listening with his mouth slightly open.

"Jeez, they've really had it out at Fifteen, haven't they?" said Forney.

Aiello said, "Yeah. And we're about to get it ourselves. You better finish that floor and pull up your pants, and make quiet in a corner."

"Whaddya mean?"

"Listen, this place is going to be crawling with top brass, plenty quick. What I mean!"

"Jeez, I never thought of that," said Forney. He hastened back to his pail and began furiously mopping the last dry section of the Communications Room floor.

In the dark, chilly bedroom, Weiler listened and then said in a low voice, "Okay, Cheers, I'll be right over. You'd better notify Secretary Ebbutt. Tell him I'll call him as soon as I'm briefed. Maintain contact with Fifteen."

Weiler put the phone down gently, but there was a click that could not be avoided. He heard a stir in the other bed, and a sleepy voice.

"Bert?"

"It's all right, honey — just a call from Base. I have to go over."

Lucy said something that sounded like "Hrmph."

He said again, "It's all right. You go back to sleep."

He dressed without turning the light on, a chunky man getting into his uniform and knotting his tie, and saying to himself, "Oh, damn the luck. Oh, damn it."

He shut the bedroom door and went across the dark living room and through the kitchen where his heels sounded loud, and out the back door. It was cold up here on the plateau at this hour, and dark and starry and lonesome. He tried to ease the car out quietly, but the cold motor backfired and he swore at it, glad to have something to swear at beside the thing that had happened 500,000,000 miles away.

The leather cushions of the convertible were icy. Weiler wished he had a coat, but you couldn't wear one, not with all these hardy young lieutenants running around and not feeling the Colorado chill at all. You had to pretend you didn't feel it either, or they'd be more than ever convinced that you were just an old crock, 41 years old, and nearly all your jumps behind you.

He drove fast and carefully down the winding suburban road, thinking of things like that but not thinking of the other thing 500,000,000 miles away in the blackness. Time enough for that when he knew all about it — he had a rule about taking things as they came, and he tried to stick to it.

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He saw only a few lighted windows in the gaggle of new ranch-type houses that huddled up here on the foothill slope. It was far too late for parties, maybe those places had sickness. That made him think of Huck Finn floating down a river and seeing only a few lights in each dark village at night, where there were sick people, and Weiler thought:

"I was going to go down that river sometime, but I never did. Funny, when I went so much farther, that I never did that."

But that led his thoughts out to where he had gone, and to what was happening out there right now, and he wouldn't think of that yet. Take it as it comes.

He slowed down when Base Headquarters came into view as a dim cluster of lofty antenna towers cobwebbing the stars. The buildings, all brightly lighted, looked low and flat underneath those towers. Flight Base was miles beyond on the plateau, and he saw a pair of headlights coming from that direction, fast. That would be Daigh coming, so he must have heard.

"Hitting eighty," Weiler muttered. "He would."

He slowed down to a sober 45 himself before he reached the gates. It would be bad for morale, for him to come rushing in. They'd all be gabbling about how the old man had come in a tearing hurry, and that things must be really fouled up.

He got his face set, for he was pulling up in front of the buildings. He got out and walked with the correct brisk stride through the cold wind, looking confident and calm, but inside worried and a little scared . . .

It was 7:47 New York time when the news reached Sheldon Ebbutt. He was shaving in the chromium-and-tile bathroom of his apartment on East 72d Street. He had a little headache, he'd drunk whisky the night before because those two Southwestern U. S. Senators were drinking it. And it always disagreed with him; after all, he was almost 60 now.

But it had been worth it. He felt sure that he had won them over. He had become adept at sizing up politicians and meeting them on their own ground. Drinking the whisky had helped, and so had his casual invitation to a UN function that was sure to be well publicized, but when he had really put it over was when he had said bluntly:

"I suppose you know that what I want from you is money."

He had rehearsed that carefully. At first he had thought of saying, "I reckon you know," but had decided that was too corny.

It had made them sit up and take notice. In fact, Fisher had guffawed and said, "Well, sir, I'm glad you come right out with it. But it's no use. Already your bureau is costing the United States more than the entire UN."

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"It's going to cost more than that," Ebbutt had told him. "A great deal more. Or else, we'll have to pull back."

He'd gone after them then, with both barrels. There was a frontier, out there in space. A frontier that the UN kept pushing out and out, just as our ancestors (he had quietly associated himself there with Fisher and Sands) had pushed out the frontier in the old West. It had to keep moving out, nothing could stop it. Men were risking their lives out there and the nations could contribute money — they had to or else quit and come home.

That had got them. They had hemmed and hawed a bit but he knew when he could count on votes, and Fisher's and Sands's were sure now. It would be a slim majority for the appropriations bill down in Washington, but it would pass. Yes, it was well worth a little headache.

Then the telephone rang, and a bright female voice said, "UN Interplanetary Service Base, Colorado, calling Secretary Ebbutt."

He said, "Ebbutt speaking." He looked at the clock. This was too early, this was wrong.

A man's slightly nasal voice intoned, "Major Walter Cheers, adjutant officer in charge, speaking. There's trouble out at Fifteen, sir. Shall I play back their message?"

Ebbutt gripped the phone a little tighter. "Yes, go ahead."

A different man's voice came on, cool, rapid and sounding metallic against a background of dim sound that regularly surged up loudly and then fell back again.

"UNIS Base Fifteen, Europa, 17:33 SST. Colonel Alsop speaking. I report unusually violent orbital quakes of this whole quadrant, the first quake occurring at 16:08 SST, seismic intensity 4.9 plus. Foundations of Domes Four and Two damaged, that of Two beyond emergency repair. Foundation of rocket-launcher damaged. Immediately ordered evacuation of Dome Two, medical care of five personnel overcome by fumes, and then ordered repair of rocket-launcher foundation."

The voice stopped a bare instant for breath, while Ebbutt listened to that dim surge and roar of background static, and then it went on.

"At 16:52 SST, stronger quake of intensity 5 plus occurred. Rocket-launcher foundation crumbled badly, rocket toppled over. Three personnel crushed beneath it, one killed immediately, two gravely injured. Have ordered rigging of jury cranes to right rocket after repair of foundation. Repair of foundation proceeding. Minor quakes continuing. Alsop. Over."

The ghostly surge of static cut off, and the nasal voice of Major Cheers said. "End of playback, sir."

Ebbutt thought sinkingly, "And I had the appropriation votes for sure! And now this — if it's bad enough it'll queer everything. . . ."

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His lips tightened. He said aloud, "Major, let me speak to General Weiler."

"I'm sorry, he's not here yet. I phoned him and he's on his way, but — oh, just a minute. Just a minute, sir. Here's General Weiler now."

There was a click, and Weiler's voice came on. "Hello, Ebbutt, I just got here. We've had nothing since that 17:33 report. It takes over forty minutes each way, you know."

Ebbutt asked, "Bert, how bad is this?"

There was a small pause before Weiler said, "Not good. Only one base on Europa, only one rocket for emergencies, and that's out of commission till they rig it again for launching. If they can't, and the quakes get worse, either Thirteen or Fourteen on Ganymede will have to go in and bring them out."

Ebbutt said, "Listen, Bert. They mustn't be pulled out unless it's absolutely necessary. At least, not for the next few days."

"I don't *want* to pull them out unless we have to," said Weiler. "But orbital quakes run in cycles and this one hasn't peaked yet. Also, there's the matter of opposition-positions. After a few days, it won't be possible for Thirteen or Fourteen to get there without delay."

"You don't understand —" Ebbutt began, and then broke off. How could Weiler or any of them understand? What did they know about politics, appropriations, psychology? They'd go crashing ahead and do something that would ruin everything, without even considering its political effects. He said, "Bert, I'm flying out. My plane can get me there before noon."

"You don't have to come out. I'll keep you briefed."

"I think it's necessary. You'll have time to get more reports from Alsop. I'll want his own estimate of the situation."

"All right," said Weiler. "But I'm alerting Thirteen and Fourteen."

"That's all right. But make sure nothing is given to the news agencies yet. Nothing whatever."

Weiler's silence alarmed him and he asked, "You haven't given out anything already, have you?"

"No, we haven't."

"Then don't, until I arrive. See you."

Ebbutt broke the connection, and at once dialed another number. The Bureau had to be told of his whereabouts, Idlewild had to be called so his plane and pilot would be ready. Lucky that he'd already shaved and dressed —

And as he dialed and spoke he was thinking bitterly, "Why did it have to happen just before the Senate votes? Why did it?"

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II

Weiler sat in his office and thought about 32 men in prison.

They had been in prison for a long time, those men. First, in the iron guts of a rocket, lying in their bunks, telling dirty stories, eating, getting sick, smearing salve on their radiation-itch, sleeping, and waking, and sleeping again. Then strapping in, and praying, and getting bumped, and yelling to each other that they'd made it.

Made it to where? To another prison, a whole little chain of them. Four interconnected metal domes that you helped put up, and that were going to be your world from then on. The same blank metal walls, the same air that always smelled of hot metal and machine oil, the same food and faces, and always the grabbing drag of your weight-shoes that were supposed to make you feel your normal weight but never did.

You went out, to help run the parties testing for uranium, and that was when you were in the worst prison of all. Your suit was your prison then, pressing you close on every side, hanging wrong on you and trying to topple you over, smothering your every movement, never feeding oxygen quite right, making you want hysterically to move the way you used to move.

You saw everything wrong and distorted through your face-plate, and through the cold and bitter fumes that swathed it all. It always looked like a bad copy of a Bonestell painting, the rocks and ridges uncertain because your perspective and horizons were all wrong, the sky all wrong too with nothing in it but that enormous white mass that was supposed to be a planet but only looked like a vague, big brightness. You hated it, you hated all your prisons, but when they began to open up, when the ground heaved and the domes began to split and the cold poisonous murk of atmosphere began to seep in, you were scared, you wanted them back. . . .

Weiler looked down at the folders on his desk, the personnel file that Cheers had brought him. Thirty-two folders, thirty-two men, dumped down on Europa months ago and left to sweat it out. His lips tightened. He hadn't liked it, not from the start. But Ebbutt had been strong for it, and Alsop had never stopped plugging it.

"Alsop, William J., Col." It was the name on the first folder, looking up at him. "Home: Chicago. Seniority and service record: Second Martian Expedition, Fourth Martian Expedition, Second Ganymedan . . ." Not many officers had so many jumps in their record, it hadn't been possible to ignore that when they gave out the command for Fifteen.

Weiler thought, "Well, Alsop, William J., you always were a glory-hunting bastard who didn't care whether anyone else lived or died. You

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insisted on burning your fanny and I'd let you sit on the blister if it wasn't for the others you dragged in on this with you."

He leafed through the others, the 31 who were just folders on his desk, but who were also men half a billion miles away, men worried, men afraid, men hurt, and a couple of men already dead.

"Gresznik, George, Lt. Col. . . ." A good man, The Pole, and with sense too if Alsop would let him use it.

"Snedeker, Frederick, Maj. . . ." Weiler could only remember him as a solemn young ass like Cheers. He looked gloomily through the rest of the folders without real interest, though one of the last ones caught his eye.

"Reno, Orrin, Pvt. Home: Orangeville, Iowa . . ." That was only 50 miles down across the state line from his own Minnesota home town, Weiler thought. He could remember high school football games there, youngsters in buses yelling themselves hoarse on their way back home, but that was a long time ago.

He thought, "I'll bet you wish to God you were back in Orangeville, Private Orrin Reno."

He pushed the folders away, as there came a rip of thunder low above the roof. At the same moment, Daigh came in. Daigh glanced at the ceiling, his plump, pink face inquiring.

"Ebbutt?"

Weiler nodded. "He's due. What about those flight patterns?"

"Here they are. Accurate to four decimals *only*." Daigh stressed the word, worried about his responsibility. "I set up the computers that way, they're not yet complete patterns."

Weiler reached for the sheets. "I know. But I have to have something before I talk to Ebbutt."

He glanced rapidly through the Extra-Terrestial Navigation flight-patterns. They were based on takeoff from Bases Thirteen and Fourteen on Ganymede, with Fifteen on Europa as their destination. There was one for each twelve-hour period in the next five days. The picture they gave, as Weiler read them in chronological order, was dismayingly clear.

"If you ask me," said Daigh, "you're going to have to pull Fifteen out — and fast." Then as Weiler looked up, "I know, you didn't ask me."

The door opened and Cheers stepped in, unusually snappy. "Secretary Ebbutt, sir."

Weiler went forward and shook hands. He always wished that he could look like Ebbutt, intelligent, magnetic, alert — no, "distinguished" was the word. He always felt conscious, in Ebbutt's presence, of the wrinkles in his uniform, the commonplaceness of his stocky figure, his midwestern accent.

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"Hello, Bert," Ebbutt was saying, "how's Lucy? That's wonderful, that's fine."

He was taking his topcoat off, and the greeting was just as mechanical as that action, but Ebbutt could make it sound warm and sincere.

He sat down in the chair that Daigh held forward. "Now let's have the picture, Bert. Are those quakes continuing?"

Weiler picked up one of the sheets on his desk. "There was another at 22:14, Solar System Time. Slightly less intensity but bad enough, four-point-seven. Alsop decided he had better evacuate Dome Four. Domes One and Three are still intact."

"How about their rocket? Is it rigged for launching yet?"

"No. The last shock brought down their cranes. Alsop has started them on it again. But of course there'll be more shocks; you know how it is with Jupiter's inner moons when they get into one of these orbital quake-cycles, with the planet and other satellites all pulling crosswise."

He cleared his throat to continue but Ebbutt, watching him shrewdly, cut in fast. "What's Alsop's estimate of the situation? You got it?"

"I have it here," Weiler said. "But first I'd like to point out a few things."

"Later, Bert, after I've heard Alsop's sum-up. I can't talk about a situation I'm not briefed on."

Weiler, defeated, glanced at Cheers. "Play it back. That's the 23:03 message."

The four men listened as Alsop's voice, 500,000,000 miles and hours of time away, spoke in cool, quick tones.

"Situation here at Fifteen is still well in hand. Our cranes are being reerected, and we anticipate rocket will be rerigged for launching by 12 noon, October 10. Anticipate no further quake damage that cannot be handled. Personnel dead, Froisland, Lang. Personnel badly injured, Booker, Louis, Arbulian. Morale excellent. Alsop."

Weiler thought, "I'll bet morale is excellent. I'll bet that Private Orrin Reno is happy as a lark out there."

Ebbutt said cheerfully, "Well, now, Bert, this could be worse. Alsop seems to have things under control."

Weiler said flatly, "I've known Alsop since the Second Martian. He's been crazy ever since then for newspaper glory. He'd let Fifteen be shaken down around his ears before he'd ask to be pulled out."

"But if he says there's no immediate danger —" Ebbutt began.

"How *can* he say that? 'Anticipate no further quake danger that cannot be handled.' That only means that Alsop's got his fingers crossed and is gambling there won't be any more bad shakes." Weiler handed a sheet to Ebbutt. "Look at that. When Europa reaches Maximum Strain position,

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relative to the planet and other satellites, its quake-cycle will reach a peak. Maximum Strain position isn't for a week yet. What's it going to be like by then?"

Ebbutt looked at him keenly. "Let's get this straight, Bert. Are you formally recommending that we pull Fifteen out?"

Weiler was old in the Service, old enough to watch his step. He said evenly, "I'm giving you my view of the situation as opposed to Alsop's optimistic one. You'll recall that I brought up this matter of the orbit-quakes when Fifteen was first decided on."

He thought grimly, "Fifteen is more your baby than it is mine, Ebbutt, and you're not going to let me hold it."

Ebbutt said quickly, "Of course we knew Europa's orbit-quakes were unusually frequent but there were none as bad as these."

"You'll remember," Weiler said, "that I suggested a longer period of observation from Ganymede before we tried to base on Europa."

"Yes, I remember," said Ebbutt, his tone grave and anxious. "Well, let's stick to the present problem."

Weiler added, "If you'll glance over these ETN flight-patterns you'll see our difficulty. Any time before tomorrow noon, rockets can take off from Thirteen or Fourteen and go in fast to Europa. After that time, as the satellite positions shift, it's going to be hard — they'll have to go around the long way. I can show you that, in the Tank."

"A little later, I want to see that," Ebbutt said. "Perhaps Colonel Daigh will set it up for us. But first, a little more about the general situation."

Daigh took the hint and faded out of the room fast, looking as though he felt relieved to go. Major Cheers went with him.

Ebbutt leaned across the desk. The man was, Weiler thought, a chameleon. He could be anybody he wanted, at a moment's notice, and he did it all by slight inflections and expressions you wouldn't even notice. Right now, he had quit being the Secretary and was being a worried fellow officer, a down-to-Earth Midwesterner.

"Let's talk horse-sense, Bert," he said. "You're not like some of these lads who think UNIS is just rockets and men and bases. You know it's politics too — politics and money."

He even had a slight drawl to his voice now. "The Bureau's got to have money, every year it's got to have more money, or we stop. And politicians and people being what they are, they won't vote money for UNIS unless we can show them accomplishments that they can understand."

"And that's why we went in to Europa this year instead of waiting?" Weiler said.

Ebbutt ignored the irony. "That's why. We were going sometime, and

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it was better to do it now. Otherwise, what would we have to show when we asked for more billions? We've swung the vote the last two years on the Ganymede jump, but this year it had to be something new or — no increase. Now the appropriation's coming up in Washington. If the United States doesn't increase, no country will. And they *won't* increase, if we pull back Fifteen just before the vote. We'll be lucky if they don't cut us!"

"I know all that," Weiler said flatly. "All the same, I'm Commander of Operations, remember that. If I think Fifteen is in danger and don't pull them out, what kind of Commander am I?"

"Bert, what are you supposed to go by? The reports and estimates of the base commander, aren't you? All right, Alsop says he can hang on. He *wants* to hang on, he'll be furious if you pull them. So what else can you do?"

"You forget," said Weiler, "that I know Alsop, that he's fame-happy, that he'd risk every man in the Service and not turn a hair."

And he thought, "You know that too, you're taking advantage of it to run risks and yet keep us in the clear — but over my dead body!"

Ebbutt got up and came around the desk. "Look, Bert, you're Commander and you're thinking of your men. It does you credit. I admire you for it. But don't forget, you're not Commander of just men but of the Service. Your responsibility is to it, not to its individual members. And what's best for the Service, here?"

He put his hand on Weiler's shoulder in a warm gesture. "Is it best for the Service if our appropriations, our life-blood, are cut? You know as well as I do that if there's dissatisfaction about pulling back, I'll have to throw you to the wolves. How are you going to like that? How is Lucy going to like it?"

His face was sincere, friendly, worried. And Weiler, looking up at him, thought, "You clever bastard. You've got Alsop's weak spot pegged and you think you've got mine too. Lucy . . ."

III

Weiler had met Lucy Tyrell the summer after he got back from the Fourth Martian Expedition. He was lieutenant colonel by then, for he had been one of Nichols' officers in the Second, and Nichols was now commanding the whole Service. He'd been promised a step up the following year, and it looked as if he might beat out Wall for command of the First Ganymedan.

Everybody was lionizing the "spacemen" that year, and that was how Weiler got invited up to a party at Wilson Tyrell's Denver mansion. He wasn't too impressed by Tyrell's millions, but his daughter was another

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matter. Weiler had never known anyone with her lazy, sophisticated charm. He went away from the party in love with her. She didn't discourage him, though he had an uneasy feeling that it was the glamor of his uniform that attracted her, and not himself.

He hit Gresznik once when Gresznik said, "You ought to grab her, right now is the only chance we'll ever get for rich wives."

He didn't want a rich wife, he wanted Lucy, and he didn't think he was going to get her, but he did. He was stepped up to full colonel and announced to command First Ganymedan, and a week later they were married.

Weiler said, "You didn't do it just because I'm going to make a jump?"

Lucy just laughed, but he couldn't help feeling that if he hadn't become an expedition commander it wouldn't have happened.

He went on First Ganymedan and spent the toughest six months of his life. The jump was too long, the men were washed up by the time they got there, and though he got all his rockets but one down without major crashes, they had a bad time before they got the domes up for Base Thirteen.

After that, though, he had a little luck. The orbital tremors weren't bad on Ganymede, not so bad as on the satellites closer in, and only a few of his men went dome-crazy. Most lucky of all, they found good uranium indications quite close by, and when Weiler came back everyone said that First Ganymedan had been the most successful jump yet.

He came back crazy to see Lucy, and she was still wonderful, but after a little time he began to worry about her. She was getting bored with living at the Base with him. She talked of his leaving the Service. Weiler thought that if he could make Commander she'd be so proud that she'd stay with him, so he went all out for it. Wilson Tyrell had a lot of political influence, and Ebbutt always needed all the help he could get at Washington, so when the ailing Nichols retired, Weiler stepped in.

He had been able to quit worrying, then. Since he'd become Commander, with his picture in all the big magazines and his name known to everyone, Lucy hadn't talked of his quitting the Service.

But if this blow-up at Fifteen got him kicked out to head Research Division or some routine job like that, what would she do?

Ebbutt knew all that, he knew all about people and used his knowledge, and he stood now saying earnestly:

"You have to think of things like the Service's future, and your own future, and Lucy's, before you blow your gaskets on this, Bert."

Weiler knew perfectly well what he really meant, and Ebbutt knew he knew, but you didn't put things like that into so many words.

He said, "You want to wait before we send anybody in to evacuate Fifteen? How long?"

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"Until Alsop himself asks for evacuation," Ebbutt said. "Doesn't that make sense? He's on the spot, he can estimate things better than we can. Surely if he says he can hold out three days, he can. That's not long."

Three days, thought Weiler. So that was the time Ebbutt was fighting for. That meant that the UNIS Appropriation bill would be voted on by the Senate within that time.

No, three days wasn't long. Not when you were sitting in a nice warm office. But it could be a long time out there, with the whole surface of the satellite cracking, with the domes heaving and grating and grinding and the men dragging around in their suits with helmets always handy, and slipping and staggering out in the poison atmosphere as they tried to get their rocket upright again. It could be a very long time.

Cheers came in and said, "The callback from Thirteen and Fifteen will be in in a few minutes. Shall I switch it in here?"

Weiler got up, glad of a chance to move. "No, we'll listen in at the Communications Room."

In Communications, both Aiello and his relief operator, Vaughn, were at the panel. A lanky orderly private stood in a corner and looked at Weiler and Ebbutt with uneasy eyes.

They waited, as the loudspeaker made space-static sounds, surging up and down, until Burdeau's anxious voice came through.

"UNIS Base Thirteen, Ganymede, 1:44 SST. Burdeau speaking. We have two rockets ready to take off for Europa upon orders. May I suggest takeoff before 12 SST this date, otherwise the flight-pattern becomes difficult. Messages from Fifteen discouraging. Await orders. Over."

Weiler looked at Ebbutt, but Ebbutt merely looked up at the loudspeaker. He couldn't argue with him any more here, Ebbutt was forcing him along.

He said to Aiello, "I'll call back, give me the mike." Into the mike, when Aiello had called Thirteen, he said, "General Weiler speaking. No takeoff orders yet but keep your rocket crews readied. Over. Out."

He said to Ebbutt then, "Burdeau would have more news than we have about Fifteen, and it doesn't look good to him."

"We'll see what Alsop reports," said the Secretary.

Seven minutes later, Alsop's crisp voice came out of the loudspeaker. "UNIS Base Fifteen, Europa, 1:51 SST, Alsop speaking. At 1:02, further quake of intensity 4.2, but no further damage except slight crack in Dome One. Repairs completed. Rerigging of rocket proceeding. Conditions generally satisfactory. Over."

Weiler thought, "Satisfactory, hell! He's only got two domes left and now one of them is starting to give way."

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But Ebbutt said, "With your permission, Bert, I'll answer Alsop myself. Thanks."

Aiello made the call, and Weiler listened incredulously as Ebbutt spoke firmly into the mike.

"Secretary Ebbutt speaking. I congratulate you on the way you have handled this emergency, Colonel Alsop. Many commanders would have called for evacuation, and we are proud that you haven't. But if you feel you need help, you must call for it at once. Over. Out."

Ebbutt turned then, putting down the mike, and met Weiler's gaze squarely.

"Shall we go back to your office, Bert?"

"Yes," Weiler. "Let's go back there."

In the office, he shut the door and then said, "You know what you've done, Ebbutt? You've maybe sentenced thirty men to death."

"Come now, Bert! Didn't I tell Alsop to call for help if he needs it?"

"You told him. You told him exactly what would make him hold out till hell freezes over before he requests evacuation. You know he'd kill every one of his men to be a newspaper hero, and you encouraged him."

"Now cool down, Bert, you're letting this thing get to you. I'm going to have Daigh explain those flight-patterns to me. You get a grip on yourself."

Left alone, Weiler got up and went to a steel cupboard. He reached behind a stack of forms and brought out a bottle of bourbon. He poured a paper cup half full, and drank, and then put the bottle back and went back to his desk. He felt a little sick.

He'd always felt that there was something a bit ruthless about Ebbutt, but hadn't realized before just how ruthless he could be. He was going to let 30 men take their chances rather than risk his appropriation, and he was doing it without a quiver.

He thought violently, "Damn Alsop! If Wall were only there, or Burdeau—"

Or if only Alsop would get scared. But he wouldn't. He was a selfish, egotistic show-off, but he had guts. That was a fact that they didn't teach you when you were young, a fact you learned as you went along, that a man could be a nasty heel and still have guts. Alsop would bull it through to the bitter end before he requested evacuation.

The personnel files still lay on his desk, and he looked through them again. He didn't want to, he didn't want to know the men out there better, it was easier to think of them as names. But he had nothing else to do than to read them, and find out that The Pole's middle name was Casimir, that Major Snedeker had slight varicose veins, that Private Orrin Reno had played high-school basketball and had passed the aptitude tests for

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the Service at grade 72.3. He read all about Orrin Reno; it was like reading about himself twenty years ago. He felt sicker, all the time.

IV

Ebbutt woke up on the couch in the adjutant's office. The window was dark now and he looked at his watch. It was 9:49, he had slept over two hours.

He turned on the lights and went on into Weiler's office.

"Bert?"

But there was nobody there. Ebbutt thought for a moment and then went out into the corridor and down the corridor into the Communications Room.

Aiello wasn't there now but Vaughn, a blond youngster, sat at the panel and that loutish orderly was yawning in a chair against the wall. He stiffened rustily to his feet as Ebbutt came in:

Vaughn said, "The general? No, sir, he hasn't been in here since he sent that message to Thirteen." He glanced at his slips. "Nine thirty-five — fifteen minutes ago."

Ebbutt's face remained smooth but he asked a trifle quickly, "A message to Thirteen?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can I see a copy of that and any messages from Fifteen?"

Vaughn handed him the two top slips from one pile, and the two top slips from another.

Ebbutt read them fast; they were quite short.

"UNIS Base Fifteen, Europa, 2:58 SST, Alsop speaking. Report further small tremors, but without serious damage. Rocket now rerigged for launching. Thanks for your confidence in me, Secretary Ebbutt. Over."

"UNIS Base Fifteen, Europa, 4:01 SST, Gresznik speaking. At 3:39 SST, serious quake of approximate intensity 5.8. Dome One slightly damaged further, but emergency repairs successful. Rocket shaken down again, jamming between cranes. Personnel Snedeker, Major, and Larsen, Corporal, injured. Colonel Alsop personally directing rerigging of rocket, reports situation still in hand. Over. Out."

"UNIS Base One, Earth, 5:57 SST, to Burdeau, UNIS Base Thirteen, Ganymede. Take off as soon as possible for Europa and evacuate all personnel of Base Fifteen. Weiler. Out."

"UNIS Base One, Earth, 6:01 SST, to Gresznik, Lieutenant Colonel, UNIS Base Fifteen, Europa. Hang on, Pole, we're pulling you. Weiler. Out."

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Ebbutt laid the slips back down beside Vaughn, and without a flicker in his voice or face, he asked,

"Where is General Weiler now?"

Forney, the orderly, spoke hesitatingly. "I saw him in The Tank just now, sir."

"Thank you, private." Ebbutt went out and went down the corridor fast to the door marked ETN CHART ROOM, KEEP OUT.

The only light in the big room was the bright glass globe at the center. It played the part of Sun in this tiny universe, and the little plastic globes that moved on supporting standards in concentric circular grooves were the scale-model planets out to Saturn that turned in the harsh electric sunlight with their tiny, turning moons.

Weiler's chunky figure was not much taller than the standard that was center and axle of the biggest planet and its web of wire-supported satellites. As it and the others turned they made a slow whirring, and he didn't hear Ebbutt until he was right behind him. Then he turned.

He said, "I take it you've been to the Com Room?"

Ebbutt said, "Yes, I've just been there. Bert, how long before that rocket will take off from Thirteen, after getting your order?"

Weiler hadn't expected the question, he was at first surprised and then he understood. "An hour is about the soonest they can do it. Even with the crew on ready."

Ebbutt glanced at his watch, at the double dial that showed Solar Standard Time too. "Good, there's still forty minutes margin."

Weiler said, "Yes. But I'm not going to retract that order, so forget it."

"No time to argue it with you now, Bert. You've got to retract. Alsop wants to hold out and he's going to get his chance to do so."

"If I don't —"

Ebbutt shrugged. "I'm sorry. It's within my authority to demand and accept your resignation, and appoint Daigh temporary commander. He'll retract it."

Weiler nodded. "I thought that would be it. But I don't think you can do that, not right now. Later, yes — but not now."

"Why not?"

Weiler said, "After I messaged Thirteen and Fifteen, I called the news agencies. I told them Fifteen was in trouble. I imagine the reporters and TV men will be here pretty quickly now."

Ebbutt's face lengthened just a trifle but he gave no other sign, except that for a moment he didn't say anything. They stood there, the little planets slowly whirring and imperceptibly turning, with the pitiless electric sunlight falling on them.

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"If you throw me out now," Weiler said, "it still won't do you any good. People will want to know what's being done about Fifteen. You won't dare retract my order."

Ebbutt said, finally, "You know what your trouble is, Bert? You're not a Commander yet, not really. You've sat in the chair, you've had the title, but you're still not a Commander. You can't see things big. You're a major yet, pretending to be a Commander."

"Maybe so, Ebbutt. Anyway, it's done."

"You know that pulling Fifteen will wreck the appropriation."

"Yes, I know it."

"And you don't care?"

"Not enough to go along with you and Alsop any further."

Cheers came into The Tank. He came toward them, stepping carefully between Mars and Earth, a uniformed giant. He said, "General, there are a lot of reporters outside. And some TVmobiles. They want a statement from you."

"Later," said Weiler.

"Go ahead and give them a statement if you want," said Ebbutt. "This is your show."

"I'll give it to them," said Weiler. "But later. Right now —"

Across The Tank, across the little solar system whose delicately poised planets trembled slightly to the vibrations, Vaughn's voice rattled fast from the intercom loudspeakers.

"General, an Urgent-and-Immediate from Fifteen! General —"

Weiler moved fast. By the time he reached the door, Vaughn had switched over and it was Gresznik's voice coming out of a roar of static. The Pole sounded excited, and scared.

"— sixty six-oh-one plus, causing ridge-slips northwest of us. Dome One split wide open, personnel evacuated into Three but two men caught under collapsing rocket-cranes. Afraid this is it. I am afraid this —"

Weiler heard the voice break off as they ran down the corridor and there was only the roar of static as they entered the Communications Room. Vaughn, pale and scared, turned from the panel briefly. He said, "I'm still getting their wave but Colonel Gresznik just stopped talking."

"If their wave is coming in, they must still be all right," Ebbutt said.

But Weiler, his first startled excitement all washed out of him, went over to the wall and sat down heavily in the chair there.

"Hell, they've had it," he said harshly. "Three was their last dome."

"But if we're still getting their wave, they must —"

Weiler wouldn't listen. He was through arguing. He felt that he was through with a lot of things.

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He thought, "I was too late, Pole. I was too late, Orrin Reno. I should have sent that order twelve hours ago and told Ebbutt to go to hell."

Suddenly Vaughn exclaimed, "*Fifteen!* Listen —"

He switched over as he spoke. Out of the loudspeaker came not only the dull surge and roar of space static but other, irregular sounds — sounds like cannonadings and crackings and distant voices.

Then from the loudspeaker a hoarse voice that rose almost to a shout. "Alsop speaking! I tried to stick it out but we're done for, dome collapsing under ridge-slip, no use —" The roar drowned him for a moment as they listened, no one moving at all, then Alsop's hoarse shout again. "—tell them I did my best! I —"

There was nothing more. There was nothing at all, except the static, nothing until Vaughn said tightly, "Their wave's gone."

"They're all gone," said Ebbutt.

And Weiler thought, "That was like you, Alsop, that last grandstand gesture. You had to die telling what *you* did, your last grab for the fame, the publicity, the glory, and to hell with what everybody else there did.

"How did the others die, with no heroics to help them out, the others that you made stay there, Alsop? How did *you* die, Orrin Reno? In your suit, with the dome coming down on you, scared and your heart beating fast and everything seeming to go around and around, and yet not believing that it could be happening to you?"

Weiler got up and went across the room to Ebbutt. He said, "They stayed there for nothing. Just for nothing, as far as you and your damned appropriation are concerned."

"You think so?" said Ebbutt. His eyes were very bright. "You don't know people, Bert. You don't know them at all."

He swung to Cheers and his voice crackled. "Bring in those reporters and the TV men. Tell them I want their cameras in here, and I want notice given of a world-wide flash bulletin on all networks. Tell them Base Fifteen is gone, but they're going to hear the playback of its commander's last words! The world is going to hear it!"

Cheers went out fast. Weiler merely stared at the Secretary. Ebbutt had a flushed, wire-taut look.

"We'll set the cameras up in The Tank. I'll make the brief announcement. Then — nobody! Just a view of those little planets, and Alsop's last message played back. Hell, Captain Scott's last note will be nothing to it. We'll create a sentiment for UNIS like an avalanche."

Weiler said, slowly, "I think you will. I think it'll work, and you'll make Alsop a hero, and your appropriation will go through. But count me out of it. I'm going home."

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He went across to his own office. He took out the bottle and poured a full paper cupful. Ebbutt had followed him.

"What I said still goes. You're not a real Commander yet. Too naïve. But you will be, in time."

"I will?"

"Yes. I'm not throwing you out. I couldn't anyway, without ruining the effect I have to create. You stay. But you'll see things the way I do, in time."

"Maybe I will, Ebbutt. But I hope not. I hope I never see things your way."

Cheers stuck his head in, and from the corridor they heard the sound of voices and hurrying feet.

"I've brought them in, sir — they're starting to set up their cameras in The Tank now."

"All right," said Ebbutt. "I'm coming."

He went on out. Weiler went to his desk, and poured himself another drink.

He thought, "Here's to you, Private Reno. You never knew why it had to happen to you, and that's just as well. It's just as well."

He threw the paper cup away and went out.

In The Tank, standing in front of the spinning model of Jupiter and its moons, Ebbutt faced the glaring lights and the impersonal eyes of the television cameras. He had carefully rumpled his hair and his necktie — not too much, just enough to make it look as though he was too upset to care about his appearance. It was little touches like that that counted.

The brief introductory announcement was finished, and Ebbutt looked into the cameras with the strained, set expression he knew how to assume. But he kept his voice quiet, it was always better to make people listen closely.

"Some thirty-two of our sons have just died on a faraway world," he said simply.

"They are dead, and Base Fifteen is destroyed," Ebbutt went on. "The farthest point to which our human civilization has extended is gone. We've been defeated, pushed back. And what do we do now?"

He paused again. "We can stay defeated. We can pull back for good, we can cut UNIS down, we can stint it and starve it and finally quit."

Ebbutt brought his chin up with a dramatic snap, and now he let his voice rise. Here was where he really had to sell them. "But *they* didn't quit, out there! They went down fighting — fighting for us. I want you to hear the last words, the dying words, of the heroic commander of those men!"

He didn't move, but the cameras rolled in past him to focus close on

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the toy planet and its tiny spinning moons, as Vaughn switched on the playback. And again the cannon-crackings and roaring space static came in, and the hoarse voice shouting, "Alsop speaking! I tried to stick it out —"

To the last word, the last thunderous roar, with the cameras full on the tiny model of Europa, and then Ebbutt said, "That is all."

The cameras cut, and voices babbled, and it was over. And Ebbutt thought, "They *can't* vote me down now. They won't dare. I've given people a shiny new hero, and they won't rest till Fifteen is reestablished."

He felt tired and old. He had slept but a few hours, and he had to get back to New York and keep sentiment hot until he had the appropriation for sure. Maybe now he could even get it increased further . . .

Cheers came back into Weiler's office, as Ebbutt was putting on his topcoat. "A car is waiting, and your plane will be ready, sir."

Ebbutt said, "Thanks, lieutenant."

He paused, as he saw the look on Cheers's stony young face. He asked, "You think I'm a bastard too, don't you?"

Cheers said nothing.

"Well, maybe I am," Ebbutt said heavily. "Maybe you have to be, in my spot. Space can't be conquered by courage and brains alone. You need money, and votes, and the approval of foolish people. But you can't see that."

Cheers, very pale, said, "I can see it. I think you go all out for UNIS. But for us, the men of it — you don't care if we live or die."

Ebbutt nodded. "Weiler said that. And he was right. I don't care. The day I start caring, I'll be no good to my job — no good at all."

He said, "Goodbye, lieutenant. Tell Weiler I'll call him."

He went out, toward the waiting car. Far away across the plateau, rocket-thunder rolled over the sky but Ebbutt did not even look that way.

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GAVAGAN'S BAR

The Weissenbroch Spectacles

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP
AND FLETCHER PRATT

MR. GROSS LAID a package on the bar and said, "My boilermaker, and double on the whisky, Mr. Cohan." He turned a head like a basketball toward the door. "Is that rain? That's all I needed. That *mamzer* of a nephew . . ."

Young Mr. Keating from the library glanced at Mr. Gross and raised his voice firmly to forestall the oncoming anecdote. "I'll check the closed stacks, Doc, but I don't think we have a really good one. However, I can ask interlibrary service."

The snub-nosed Dr. Tobolka appeared to hesitate between the difficulty of dealing with a Gross anecdote and that of following Keating's lead and inventing a reason for not listening. At this moment Gross sipped his boilermaker, emitted a ponderous belch and then a groan of positively subterranean depth.

Tobolka said, "Are you all right, Adolphus?"

Gross said, "If I was any worse, the undertakers are taking me off without even waiting till I fall down. It's my soul." He patted the protuberance just below his sternum to indicate that this was the seat of his soul.

"What's the matter with your soul?" asked Tobolka.

"It's hurt. On account of this." He indicated the package, about three by four feet and flat. "It was all because of that television. Myself, I'd rather be at Gavagan's than looking at it, but you know how it is with kids. While they're supposed to be doing their homework from school, there they are lying in front of it and watching a cowboy shoot off his

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gun fifty times without having to put no bullets into it, and this Miss Marks comes around —"

"I beg your pardon," said a man who was sitting on a stool a couple of places down from Gross, "but is that the Miss Marks who teaches at Pestalozzi School?"

Gross regarded him with gravity. "She is that one, and why she would be spending her time teaching I cannot tell you, because what she ought to be doing is in the movies, but I guess maybe there is some reason why she does not, because I heard she got a tryout at the Striped Cat night club and they did not want her after the first show."

"Sorry to interrupt," said the man. He was young, well-dressed and good looking, with a smile that flashed on and off as though controlled by a switch. "I was just about to meet her, and —"

"Make it no matter," said Gross heavily, downing the last of his boilermaker and shoving the glasses toward Mr. Cohan for a refill. "Like I was saying, this Miss Marks comes around and says that if the kids don't do their homework from school no better, they wouldn't get passed, and I better do something about this television they're watching all the time. And my business has been keeping me late, and my wife, how can you expect a woman to keep the kids from doing what they want?"

Gross breathed deeply and looked around with a certain belligerence. Nobody contradicted him, so he went on: "So this is where that nogoodnick Hershie, my nephew, comes in. I am telling him about this, and he says he has got the answer so that I will not have to lose all the money I spend on this television. He says he has got a very valuable picture which is painted by a Frenchman, only he can't sell it himself because he don't know the outlets, but it is about a even trade for a used television set. So I take him up on it. See?"

Gross looked around again. Keating, obviously anxious to get the worst over with, said, "And this is the picture?"

Gross emitted a kind of growl and applied himself to his second boilermaker. "And you know what?" he said. "I take it to Irving Schelmerotter, he's the dealer that buys for the Munson Museum, and he takes one look at it and says it's saloon art and to hell with it. So now all I got for my television set is this picture, and the kids will be wild because the television set is gone, and my wife will be nuts on account I got stuck."

Before he could lapse into gloom again, Tobolka said, "What is it a picture of?"

"A knife," said Gross.

"A what?" said Keating. "Why should anyone paint a picture of a knife? Or for that matter why should they hang it in a saloon?"

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"No, you don't get it," said Gross. "It's a woodknife, without no clothes on."

Mr. Cohan leaned across the bar. "You wouldn't be wanting to show it to us now, would you?" he asked.

"I have to cut the string," said Gross.

"String we got, and better than you have on it now," said Mr. Cohan.

"Okay, since you ast me," said Gross. He cut the string and peeled off the paper. Then he hoisted the picture in its ornate gilt frame onto the bar and balanced it, looking at it with an air of melancholy pride.

"Oh," said Keating and Tobolka in unison.

The painting was one of a wood nymph of extreme, not to say flagrant, nudity. She sat on her curled-up right leg, which in turn rested upon a tree stump. Her left leg was thrust out to the side and rear. Her body was upright, with her head tipped back and her hands clasped behind her neck beneath a coiffure of approximately 1880. She was gazing at a painted sunbeam with a smile of ineffable idiocy, and a pair of gauzy wings, though absurdly small by aerodynamic standards, testified to her supernatural origin. They failed to balance a pair of mammae of transcendental size and salience.

"It's by a Frenchman, see?" said Gross, and indicated the corner where the signature "Guillaume" was visible.

Keating donned a pair of glasses with heavy black frames and said, "Reminds me of the old White Rock ad; the one they had in the magazine thirty years ago, before some advertising man whittled her down."

"Whittled her down?" said Gross.

"Yes. I compared some of the old magazines with the modern ones, and Psyche used to be a hell of a lot more pneumatic."

"Okay," said Gross. "But what am I going to *do* with it?"

"Your art dealer was perfectly right, my friend," said Tobolka. "An unusually perfect example of saloon art, even though Guillaume is a recognized painter. I suggest you get Mr. Cohan to hang it behind the bar as a permanent exhibit."

Mr. Cohan shook his head. "Gavagan would never stand for it," he said. "This is a family bar, this is, and he wants to keep it that way. Would you be wanting your sister to look at a thing like that while she was drinking her whisky sour, now?"

"I beg your pardon," said the young man from down the bar. "May I see it?"

"Help yourself," said Gross.

The young man climbed down from his stool and came around to face the picture. He drew from the inside pocket of his coat an eyeglass case,

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and with a flourish produced from the case a pair of glasses which he hooked over his ears. They had frames and bows of thin, plain metal, oxidized black, and the thick octagonal lenses gave them an old-fashioned air. An air of satisfaction spread across his face as he contemplated the major features of the composition. He peered at the signature, then turned to face Gross.

"Sir," he said, "I am not a wealthy man, but I would be willing to give you eighty-five dollars for this painting."

In the background Keating gave an audible gasp. Gross lowered the picture to the floor and said, "You couldn't make it a hundred, could you?" he said. "I got to do something for the wife and kids after that television —"

"Eighty-five," said the young man, the lines setting firmly around his mouth. "Take it or leave it." He produced a checkbook and riffled it slightly.

Gross said: "One man to another, this is practically highway robbery, but you got a deal, Mr. —" He extended a hand.

"Bache," said the young man, shaking it, "Septimius Bache. How shall I make out the check?"

"Just make it out to Mr. Cohan here, and he gives me the cash, see?" said Gross. "My name's Gross, and these here are Mr. Keating and Dr. Tobolka."

There was more handshaking. Bache said: "In honor of a successful operation, I think you should serve out a round, Mr. Cohan. I'll add the amount to my check. And oh, yes, will you take care of the picture for me back of the bar for the evening? I'm expecting to meet someone. Gin and bitters for me; the Hollands gin."

The picture was passed across the bar, there was the exhilarating sound of liquor making contact with glasses, and Tobolka raised his drink in salute.

"Pardon me a perhaps very personal question," he said. "But if you're willing to tell, I'd like to hear why you bought that picture. Not that the price you paid for it was extravagant. I'm no expert, but from what I understand, this is about the market price for a picture of the period. But why this particular one?"

Bache fingered his glass, glanced around the bar as though to see whether anyone else was listening, and then gazed at his drink. "I'll tell you," he said. "The same thing that brought me in here tonight. You see, I'm . . ." He hesitated, and sought strength in his gin and bitters. "Well, I suppose you'd say I'm a sort of a fetishist."

Mr. Cohan frowned. "There'll be none of that in here, young fella," he warned. "Not since that Englishman that me brother Julius arrested outside this very bar for molesting."

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"But I don't molest. It's just that —"

"Him and his mackintoshes . . ." Mr. Cohan added darkly.

"Oh." Bache seemed a little brighter. "Mine isn't that sort of thing at all. It's what you might almost call a *normal* type of fetishism. Are you a psychiatrist, Doctor Tobolka?"

"No. I'm not even that kind of doctor. I'm a biologist."

"Oh. Well, I — I'd thank you for another gin and bitters, Mr. Cohan. — I've been to see one. I was getting worried and run down, and after seeing a Marilyn Monroe movie I couldn't sleep very well, and after I saw Gina Lollobrigida . . ."

Keating said, "And this make *you* queer?" He started to sing an approximation of a tune, which seemed to have the words, "I'm a fetishist, aren't we all?"

"Better you should go to Jersey and see some burlesque," said Mr. Gross. "Tempest Storm and you'll never sleep!"

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Cohan. "True enough there's no ladies in here at the moment, but —"

"But the trouble," Bache went on awkwardly, "was that I couldn't get interested in other girls, and I thought there must be something wrong with me. Well, this psychiatrist gave me a lot of tests and asked me some questions, and after a while said there was nothing really the matter: I was just what he called a natural breast-fetishist. He said there was nothing abnormal about it, and I might as well recognize the fact and let it contribute to my own happiness. Only if I picked out a girl to marry, I had better see that she was — well-endowed, because I wouldn't really get along well with any other kind."

Gross drew in his breath noisily. Tobolka motioned for another round, gave a little laugh, and said: "It seems rather like a — er, a counsel of perfection. That is, unless you go to an art school and ask one of the models to marry you on the spot. I understand that even bathing suits are fitted with artificial aids these days."

"Falsies," said Keating. "That's what they call them."

"True," said Bache, "and you'd be surprised at the number of women who use them. However, I have an unusual advantage." He smiled slightly, took off the spectacles, returned them to their case and tapped it with one finger before restoring the case to his pocket. "I have my ancestor's spectacles."

"Your ancestor's?" said Tobolka.

"Well over a hundred years old. In fact about a hundred and seventy. In my state, I wouldn't part with them for anything."

"I should think glasses that old wouldn't be very good," said Tobolka.

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"Oh, my eyes need only a slight correction for close vision, as when I was looking at that picture, and they're all right for that. But that is only the minor use to which I put them. As tonight. You know a Mrs. Jonas?"

"Ain't been in yet tonight," said Mr. Cohan.

Bache said, "I know. I'm waiting for her. She was going to bring in this Marian Marks who, she says, is just the girl for me. That's why I came prepared."

"I don't see —" began Keating.

"It's a rather long tale," said Bache. "But I'll tell you. I'll tell you while I'm waiting. Only it's a rather dry tale, too, and I think we ought to have something in the form of a libation to see us through it.

You see (Bache went on) about 170 years ago there used to be an old spectacle-grinder somewhere in the Harz mountains in Germany, named Hein Weissenbroch. This Weissenbroch was not only a craftsman; he was close enough to the court at Erfurt so that some of the enlightenment came off on him, and he wanted to make what were thought of as scientific experiments in those days. One of his ideas was that of making spectacles out of rock quartz.

("But," said Tobolka, "quartz has such a low index of refraction.")

Exactly, doctor, exactly. You have to make the lenses so thick to get a major correction that it isn't worth while. Not to mention that clear rock crystal is expensive and hard to find. But in the first place Weissenbroch didn't know this, and in the second, he wouldn't have cared anyway. He was interested in experimenting, not in proving what everyone knew already. And rock quartz has a better transparency than glass, and gives you less chromatic aberration. I've looked it up.

He used to combine hunting for birds with his fowling piece and prospecting for quartz. One day, when he was out with a peasant named Karl Nickl, somewhere near Blankenburg, he came on an outcrop that had a vein of fine clear quartz. His only equipment that day was the fowling piece, but he explained to Nickl that he wanted a crowbar or something of the kind to pry loose some of that quartz and make a pair of spectacles. Nickl protested that this vein belonged to the kobolds and shouldn't be disturbed. He was a little hazy about any penalties for interfering with the kobold-quartz, but he was so vehement about letting it alone that Weissenbroch dropped the idea for the time being. It doesn't pay to get those peasants down on you. You're apt to get lost in the mountains.

After they got back with their bag of game, Weissenbroch was still fascinated by that kobold-quartz, but he didn't say anything more about it. A few days later, without saying anything to anyone,

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he went back up the valley where the outcrop was, taking a crowbar, and pried out a good clear piece to take back with him. Well, he split off part of it, being careful not to let anyone know what he was doing, because he didn't want stories about raiding the kobold-quartz to get around, and ground a pair of spectacles. They were designed to give only a slight correction, but that was about all anyone used in those days.

They looked like perfectly ordinary spectacles. But when Hein Weissenbroch put them on, he got the shock of his life. If he looked at the wall of his shop or around in it, they were just glasses and pretty good glasses, too, but when he went into the living room and looked at the floor, the carpet disappeared.

("How could it?" said Keating.

Tobolka said: "Some sort of diffraction-grating effect, I suppose. Go on, Mr. Bache.")

And when his wife came in from the kitchen, her clothes had also become invisible. Weissenbroch's first reaction was that she had gone mad and was going about her housework naked. They must have had a towering row about it, though the letter only hints at that.

("What letter?" said Tobolka.)

I'm coming to that. Weissenbroch was finally able to determine by feeling that although he could only see textiles as a sort of shimmery shadow through the glasses, they were still there. He had sense enough to keep from telling anyone else about this, even his wife, but not sense enough to keep away from the local inn. Unfortunately, he found there just what he hoped he would find; a couple of local *Mädchen*, not to mention the barmaid herself. From various hints in the letter, I gather that Weissenbroch became so exhilarated that he was impelled to drink a quanity of schnapps, and his conduct toward the women in question partook of the disgraceful. It was fortunate that he did not break the spectacles. What he did do was get himself taken before a magistrate and fined several marks. It was a large sum for his time.

Now, as I remarked, Hein Weissenbroch was a man who had been in touch with the enlightenment movement. He used to correspond occasionally with Goethe and Schiller at the court of Saxe-Weimar in Erfurt, and there is a record that he ground the last pair of spectacles that Schiller wore before his death. It was undoubtedly from some one at the court that he heard of the arrival in France of my ancestor, Dr. Benjamin Franklin, as ambassador of the colonies.

("Are you really a descendant of Benjamin Franklin?" said Keating, with something like admiration.)

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So they tell me (Bache went on). Well, Weissenbroch knew of Franklin as a scientist, of course, and thought that he might be able to explain how the kobold-quartz spectacles had worked. Possibly he figured he could always go back to the quartz lode and get more of the material. Anyway, he wrapped the spectacles up and sent them to one of his friends at the Saxe-Weimar court, with a covering letter addressed to Franklin, and a request that the package be forwarded. It was the only thing to do in those days; the mail service wasn't so good.

I would judge that my ancestor made good use of the spectacles. There are still some of his descendants in France, you know. But he never mentioned them either, and we wouldn't have known about them except for Weissenbroch's letter, in a spidery Eighteenth-Century German hand.

("What did he do about Weissenbroch?" asked Keating.)

We don't know. All we have is Weissenbroch's letter, with a marginal note by Franklin. It says: "Tell M. Weissenbroch d. n. atz. enuz. e. p., 4.13." Nobody knows what he meant by those abbreviations. And all we know about Weissenbroch is his letter to Franklin and his correspondence with Goethe and Schiller. The line of communication was cut. You see, that was about the time when the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel began selling his soldiers to King George for service in the American colonies. The court of Saxe-Weimar took a very dim view of it and wouldn't have anything to do with Hesse-Cassel for a while. And Weissenbroch lived in Hesse-Cassel.

Mr. Cohan leaned across the bar. "And would you be telling us now, that when you have them on, it looks as though nobody had no more clothes than a monkey?"

"I'm telling you exactly that," said Bache, producing the spectacles again and seating them on his nose as he surveyed the bartender. "For instance, they tell me that you have a large wen on your abdomen, just northeast of your navel and below your belt buckle."

Mr. Cohan turned a color that would have done credit to sparkling Burgundy; but before he could make an appropriate answer, the door opened and the brass-blonde Mrs. Jonas walked in, followed by a taller, younger woman.

"Hello, Mr. Cohan," said Mrs. Jonas, steering her protege down the bar toward Bache. "Sorry if we kept you waiting, Septimius, but we didn't want to get caught in that shower. Marian, this is Septimius Bache; Septimius, I'd like you to meet Marian Marks. I think you two have a lot in common."

She certainly lived up to the advance notice Gross had given. Hollywood could have used the face that smiled from under a pile of red hair,

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and the rest of the ensemble down to a pair of very well turned ankles appeared to be in accord with what was visible. But Septimius Bache's face was curiously blank and his voice was curiously cool as he barely touched the hand she offered and said:

"Oh, yes," said Bache, looking through his spectacles. There was a little pause. "Would you — uh — care for a drink?"

"A stinger, please," said the girl.

Any conversation was abruptly halted when the door opened again and another girl came in, who might have been the antithesis of Marian Marks. She was short, and shell-rimmed glasses sat on a decidedly plain face beneath round-bobbed black hair. In contrast to Miss Marks' rather gorgeous turnout, she was wearing a short coat over a shapeless smock. She handed Mrs. Jonas a package.

"Professor Thott said he had to mark term papers, but he knew you'd be wanting the geranium slip, so he sent me over with it," she said.

"Thank you, Ann," said Mrs. Jonas. "You know Marian Marks, don't you? Ann Carter, this is Septimius Bache."

Bache took her hand. "Won't you stay with us a while?"

"No," said the girl. "I've got to get back to the university. Thanks just the same."

She turned, but Bache took a step after her. "As a matter of fact, I've got to go in that direction myself. Do you mind if I walk back there with you?" He turned to the others. "Glad to have met you, Miss Marks. See you later, Ellie."

He walked beside Ann Carter to the door, gazing down at her through enraptured eyes. As it swung to behind them, Marian Marks said: "Well! Not that I mind his walking out on me just after an introduction like that, but I wonder whatever he sees in her."

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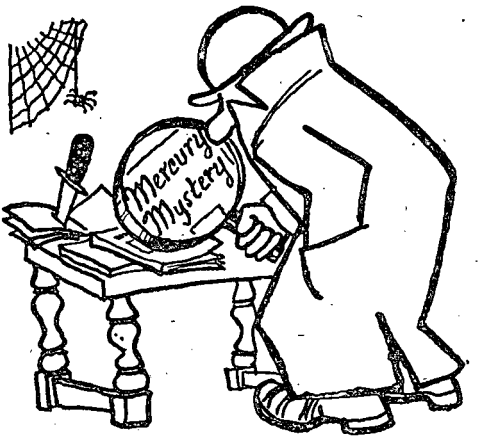

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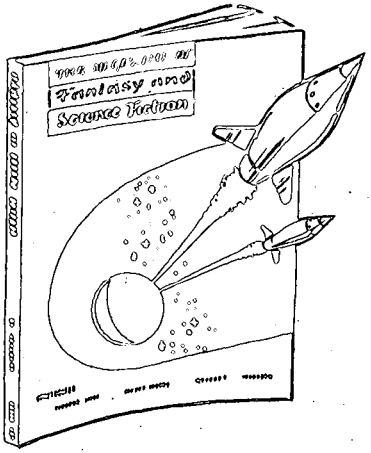

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